

JUNE 29, 2015

Parashat Balak

A False Unity Destined to Dissolve

And Moab said to the elders of Midian (Numbers 22:4)

וַיֹּאמֶר מוֹאָב אֶל זִקְנֵי מִדְיָן (בַּמִּדְבָּר כ"ב:ד)

When the international community offered support, in March of 2014, for the [newly formed Palestinian Unity Government](#) which linked Fatah in the West Bank with the terrorists of Hamas, Israel warned the world against making the grave mistake of legitimizing an organization dedicated to terror. “Hamas is a ruthless terrorist organization responsible for the murder of countless innocent civilians and an organization that says my country Israel should be destroyed,” [said Mark Regev](#), the spokesman for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. “People who want peace, people who want reconciliation here in the Middle East should be calling upon the Palestinian leadership to annul this pact with Hamas and to return to peace talks.”

This month, the unity government finally fell apart when Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas [accepted the resignation](#) of Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah, ending the alliance with Hamas which refused to let the PA operate in Gaza. Interestingly, Abbas [never consulted with Hamas](#) before dissolving the government. “Hamas rejects any one-sided change in the government without the agreement of all parties. No-one told us anything about any decision to change and no one consulted with us about any change in the unity government. Fatah acted on its own in all regards,” said spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri told AFP.

This wasn't the first time that adversaries of Israel united—albeit for a short time—to face the Jewish people together. Parashat Balak chronicles a similar unity effort between two enemies who also could not stand even a simple test of patience. Commenting on the overture of Balak, King of Moab called out to his Midianite neighbors to jointly confront the approaching Israelite juggernaut. The Midrash notes, “Behold, we find that the Midianite fought with the Moabites, as it is written, ‘who smote Midian in the field of Moab...’ (Genesis 36:35), and their mutual hatred was eternal. To what can this be compared? To two dogs who were fighting with one-another. A wolf came upon one of them. Said the other, ‘If I do not help him, today [the wolf] will kill him and tomorrow he will come for me.’ For this reason, Moab and Midian joined together.” (Tanhuma 3) Yet, their alliance quickly dissolved. When dignitaries from both nations visited Balaam in the hopes that he would curse the Jews, Balaam asked them to remain for the night while he consulted with God. We read that, “the princes of Moab abode with Balaam...” (Numbers 22:8) What happened to the princes of Midian? According to Rashi, they had already left. “When [Balaam] said to them ‘Lodge here this night’ they said, ‘there is no hope in him.’ They left him and went away...” (See Rashi on verse 7)

A unity based on mutual enmity cannot stand the test of even simple challenges. While Fatah and Hamas claimed to have acted in the interests of the Palestinian people, in truth they hoped to use their supposed unity to gain standing against Israel in the international community. If the Palestinians truly wish to unify, they must first jointly accept Israel's right to exist in peace, and then negotiate together to reach a lasting agreement with the Jewish state. A Palestinian unity agreement based on enmity for Israel will last as long as the Moab-Midian pact, and soon dissolve yet again at the first sign of strife. ■

Critical Advice

Who has counted the dust of Jacob (Numbers 23:1)

מי מנה עפר יעקב (במדבר כג:א)

The Sages in the Talmud note that the episode recorded in Parashat Balak is not the first time that a ruler consulted with Balaam before making an important political decision. When Pharaoh considered how to address the challenge of the proliferation of Jewish slaves in his country, he gathered his three main advisors. “Three [men] were involved in the consultation, and they were: Balaam, Job, and Jethro. Balaam, who suggested [the plan to cast Jewish male children into the Nile] — was [ultimately] killed, Job who remained silent, was judged with painful afflictions. And Jethro—who fled—his children and grandchildren merited to sit [among the great sages] in the Chamber of Council [of the Sanhedrin].” (Sanhedrin 106)

For giving his heinous advice, the Talmud explains that Balaam was ultimately killed by the Israelites. (See Numbers 31:8) Rabbi Eli Wolf wonders why Balaam was killed for offering his advice to Pharaoh. After all, from an Egyptian perspective, his advice was sound, for the Egyptians faced an exploding slave population. Why then was he punished for offering the King of Egypt seemingly sound advice?

Rabbi Wolf notes that according to the Sages, Balaam was a great prophet, on the level of Moses himself. Balaam’s spirituality gave him an additional perspective on the Jewish nation, which he expresses throughout our Parashah. Time and time again, he extolls the virtues of the nation of Israel: “Who has counted the dust of Jacob, or numbered the stock of Israel?...” (Numbers 23:1) Balaam, more than any other advisor, recognized the danger of harming the fledgling Jewish nation. Yet, rather than warn the Pharaoh, Balaam sensed the king’s desire to subdue the Jews through harsh and destructive measures, so he suggested a heinous solution directly in line with the Pharaoh’s sentiment. Balaam was punished not only for offering immoral advice, but he was punished for offering bad advice that ultimately ruined the kingdom of Egypt. Rabbi Wolf notes that a clear lesson in this Midrash is, “When we are asked to give advice and we know the truth, it is incumbent upon us to offer the truth...in a clear manner, even if it not easy or pleasant for the recipient or for [the person giving the advice]. We shall not be like Balaam, who, due to narrow personal interests offered advice that harmed himself and Egypt.”

Recently, several major figures, who served in primary intelligent and diplomatic roles related to Iran, followed this rule precisely, issuing an [open letter to President Obama](#) warning him about the dangers they see in the proposed agreement with Iran. Stating the deal “may fall short of meeting the administration’s own standard of a ‘good’ agreement,” and that there are “required elements that have not yet been achieved,” the letter spells out the minimum criteria needed for a good deal with Iran. The letter, sent to both the White House and the State Department, warned against weakened international inspections, a lack of information regarding possible military dimensions of Iran’s nuclear program and Iran’s ability to continue research and development once the deal expires. “The agreement will not prevent Iran from having a nuclear weapons capability,” it continues. “It will not require the dismantling of Iran’s nuclear enrichment infrastructure. It will however reduce that infrastructure for the next 10 to 15 years.” Among the signers are Obama’s former Special Assistant and Middle East negotiator Dennis Ross, former CIA Director David H. Petraeus, longtime State Department proliferation expert Robert Einhorn, former White House Coordinator for Arms Control and Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) Gary Samore and former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. James E. Cartwright.

These dedicated public servants, who served in both Republican and Democratic administrations, followed the model of Jethro, not Balaam, by insisting on speaking uncomfortable truths and refusing to remain silent when their leader considers making a potentially destructive decision. While we must commend them for their courage to speak truth to power, we must also forcefully insist that the President heed their counsel and continue to insist on a deal that will preclude Iran from becoming a nuclear power into the foreseeable future. ■

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