

JULY 18, 2016

Parashat Balak

A Dangerous Neighborhood

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

וַיֹּאמֶר מוֹאָב אֶל זִקְנֵי מִדְיָן (במדבר כב:ד)

Parashat Balak is unique in the Torah in that the vast majority of the story focuses not on the Children of Israel, but instead on their neighbors. Until the final nine verses, we find no explicit mention of Moses or any events taking place within the Israelite camp. Rather, we are afforded a perspective of Israel's neighbors and their efforts and attitudes towards the Jewish people. The picture the parashah paints is not pretty. Rashi (on 22:4) notes that while scripture indicates that the nations of Moab and Midian were in fact mortal enemies, "out of their fear of Israel they banded together," in order to combat the Children of Israel. The entire parashah explores the ongoing attempts of Israel's neighbors to find creative ways to do her harm. Netziv in *Ha'amek Davar* points out that the Jewish people had already expressed their will to pass through Moab and Midian peacefully, and had no plans to attack the two nations. Why then did they band together? Netziv (on verse 4) explains that, "This is the custom of the nations that hate Israel; to conjure fake charges and to find [Israel's] sins in order to hate them without cause..."

Sadly, too often this is still the case. Today, instead of seeking ways to improve the lives of the citizens living under their control, Israel's neighbors seem obsessed with blaming Israel for their problems and finding new and creative ways to attack the Jewish state. To Israel's south, Hamas has continued its relentless drive to attack and terrorize in every possible way. As Israel marks two years since the beginning of Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014, Israelis living in the south [continue to contend with the fear](#) of rockets falling from above or terrorists emerging from tunnels below and residents feel that the next war with Hamas is "only a matter of time." In the north of Israel lie 150,000 rockets stockpiled by Hezbollah pointed at Israel. According to the [Jerusalem Post](#), the deputy commander of the Revolutionary Guards, Brig.-Gen. Hossein Salami, warned recently that, "more than 100,000 missiles are ready to fly from Lebanon... Today, the grounds for the annihilation and collapse of the Zionist regime are [present] more than ever."

Thankfully, the United States and Israel have developed advanced systems and techniques for protecting the safety of innocent civilians in each country. The United States has provided [\\$1.3 billion in procurement funding](#) for Israel's Iron Dome system. Additionally, since 2006, the United States has contributed \$1.1 billion for Israel's David's Sling system and \$2.6 billion for Israel's Arrow program. Together, Iron Dome, David's Sling and Arrow make up a complex and effective missile defense apparatus that will enable Israel to protect lives at home and on the battlefield, keeping its citizens out of harm's way. In addition, last year, Congress appropriated \$40 million to develop a new, joint U.S.-Israel anti-tunneling defense program to locate, map and destroy terrorist tunnel networks. Towards that goal, the U.S. Department of Defense and the Israeli Ministry of Defense recently agreed to enhance collaboration on counter-tunneling research and development. The two allies will work together on a portfolio of about a dozen Pentagon projects, including an effort to identify a tunnel test site with terrains and geologies of mutual interest. The bilateral agreement represents the implementation of a multi-year congressional initiative to fund cooperative anti-tunneling programs with Israel.

Parashat Balak reminds us that the Jewish people have lived with malicious, dangerous neighbors since Moses' era. Thankfully, today the modern Jewish state is blessed with an American ally dedicated to its security that has consistently supplied critical assistance and support to develop the means to ensure the safety of Israel's citizens. ■

Using Words to Harm Others

Curse for me this people (Numbers 22:6)

אָרָה לִי אֶת הָעַם הַזֶּה (בְּמִדְבַר כ"ב:ו)

“Israeli and American families of victims of Palestinian attacks filed a \$1 billion lawsuit against Facebook, claiming the social network is providing a platform for militants to spread incitement and violence,” the Israeli website [Ynetnews](#) reported last week. “Shurat Hadin, an Israeli legal advocacy group, filed the suit on behalf of the five families in a New York court...alleging that Facebook is violating the U.S. Anti-Terrorism Act by providing a service to militant groups that assists them in recruiting, radicalizing, and instructing terrorists, raising funds, creating fear and carrying out attacks...‘Facebook can’t sit in its stone tower in Palo Alto while blood is being spilled here on the streets of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. It has a social responsibility. It can’t serve as a social network for Hamas,’ said the Israeli lawyer who is representing the families. She compared Facebook to a bank, saying [that] just as money may be transferred as a service for terror groups, so can content.”

While the lawsuit makes its way through the American legal system, the notion that dangerous and harmful words can cause real damage represents the underlying theme of Parashat Balak. The Moabite King Balak, recognizing the futility of direct military confrontation, turns to the neighboring Midianites to join together and hire the prophet Balaam to curse the Jewish nation. In their proposal to Balaam they ask that the prophet, “Curse for me this people—for they are too mighty for me—perhaps I shall prevail that we may smite them, and that I may drive them out of the land.” (22:6) Rashi (on 22:4) notes that during their consultations, the Midianites determined that while they could not prevail over Moses and his people militarily, they perhaps could attack the Jews in a different manner. The Midianites told Balaam that, “[Moses’] power lies only in his mouth [with his words]. [The Moabites said]: We too will come against them with a man whose power lies in his mouth.” The Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 20) notes that Balak never imagined that the curse would totally destroy the entire Jewish nation. Rather, he only hoped that “we may smite them”—meaning “for every twenty-four thousand, we kill one thousand.” The hiring of Balaam represented an attempt to use the power of speech to weaken and harm the nation of Israel to the point where it would be vulnerable.

Today, the Palestinians have chosen similar tactics, choosing to use the power of harmful speech to incite violence against innocent Israelis. Since this past October, 34 Israelis and two Americans have been killed in Palestinian terror attacks. The Israeli government says that much of the violence has been encouraged on Facebook, and has called on the site to more proactively police hateful content. According to [Ha’aretz](#), the Palestinian who stabbed 13-year-old Israeli-American Hallel Yaffa Ariel to death in her West Bank bedroom in early July, had been praising terrorists and voiced his wish to die a “martyr’s death” on Facebook in the days before the attack. [Wired Magazine](#) reported that in an interview on Israel’s Channel 2 News, Israeli Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan “accused Facebook of ‘sabotaging’ police efforts to curb the violence by not cooperating in investigations in the West Bank, adding that the site has ‘a very high bar for removing inciting content and posts...Facebook today, which brought an amazing, positive revolution to the world, sadly, we see this since the rise of Daesh [ISIS] and the wave of terror, it has simply become a monster,’ Erdan said.”

While Israelis rightfully insist that Facebook must do more to weed out hateful speech, the international community must also do its part and continue to highlight the ongoing campaign of incitement that is driving children and young teens to commit acts of terror against innocent civilians. These efforts include posts and [videos explicitly encouraging](#) acts of murder. The most useful contribution that we can make to further the peace process is to urge the Palestinian leadership to cease incitement to violence against Israelis and return to direct negotiations. Instead of using a campaign of words to harm and kill, the Palestinians must use their words to negotiate an agreement with Israel which will bring about peace and security to all. ■

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