

JULY 3, 2017

Parashat Balak

The Danger of a Desolate Neighbor

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

כלחך השור את ירק השדה (במדבר כב:ד)

Last week, the Israel Defense Forces struck several targets across the Syrian border over a two-day period, in response to mortar and rocket fire that continued to trickle over the border. An IDF spokesman said in a statement that, “We look with gravity on attempts to harm the sovereignty of Israel or the security of its citizens.” While tensions calmed after the Israeli action, this incident highlights the tumultuous nature of Israel’s northern region. Iran’s provision of [massive funding for Hezbollah](#), which has sent thousands of troops to fight for the regime in Syria, only amplifies the volatility of the area.

This notion of living next to a dangerous, desolate area which poses a threat is powerfully expressed by Balak, the king of Moab, in our parashah. After watching the Israelites conquer much of the territory east of the Jordan River, Balak reached out to the elders of Midian hoping to join forces against the Israelites. In his message to them, he says, “Now will this multitude lick up all that is round about us, as the ox licks up the grass of the field?” (Numbers 22:4) What message does Balak intend by using this curious analogy, comparing the Jewish nation to grazing oxen?

Rabbi Yitzchak Arama in his *Akeidat Yitzchak* commentary on Parashat Balak offers a fascinating insight. He writes, “For my entire life I wondered about this analogy, until I witnessed the oxen grazing and then I understood the intent [of the imagery]...the ox grazes by sticking its tongue out to the side of its mouth...and to bring the food into its mouth through the side...thus, the place before its mouth is safe, but surrounding it becomes desolated...[This is the intent of Balak] regarding [the Israelites], for although they promised not to engage them in war, nonetheless they were afraid of what would happen to their surroundings, like what happens to around the mouth of the ox.” According to *Akeidat Yitzchak*, Balak did not fear that he would be the subject of an Israelite attack, as he knew that the Israelites were proscribed from attacking him directly (see Deuteronomy 2:9). Nonetheless, he recognized that the desolation they would cause in the surrounding nations would adversely affect him as well.

Today, Israel finds itself in precisely the same dangerous situation. While Israel wisely refuses to intervene in the Syrian conflict, the destruction that has ravaged the country has left a void now filled by numerous competing radical terrorist groups, all vying for power and control across the Syrian countryside. It has also opened the door for Iran to try and establish an area of influence—a development Israel has vowed to prevent. At present, numerous other terrorist organizations fight the Assad-Iran-Russia-Hezbollah alliance and while the fighting has stayed thus far to Israel’s surroundings, these terrorist groups have made no secret of their long-term ambition to attack and destroy Israel. Both ISIS and al-Qaida operate near the Israel-Syria border, threatening Israel directly through possible infiltration and rocket fire. ISIS released its first Hebrew language video in October 2015, which promised that “not a single Jew will remain alive in Jerusalem.” Last week, Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah [warned that](#) “hundreds of thousands” of Arab and Muslim fighters from as far afield as Afghanistan would be ready to strike back if Israel were to attack Lebanon or Syria. Israel’s desolate surroundings pose a direct potential threat to the Jewish state.

While the Syrian front is currently quiet, we know all too well that at a moment’s notice, a single event could cascade out of control, throwing the entire region into turmoil. This frightening reality only highlights the importance of American military support for Israel, support that gives Israel the ability to send a strong message to the Syrian regime

and others fighting in the area that Israel will not tolerate stray rockets landing in Israeli territory. More importantly, it gives the Jewish state the strength to back that warning with the ability to protect itself from the many dangerous threats in the region. ■

A Skewed Perspective

You shall see but the smallest part of them (Numbers 23:13)

אפס קצתו תראה (במדבר כג:יג)

At a recent gay pride parade in Chicago called “Dyke March,” described as being a “more inclusive, more social justice-oriented” march, organizers expelled Laurel Grauer, who was carrying flags with the Star of David. The BBC [reported](#) that Grauer said she was asked to leave “because my flag was a trigger to people that they found offensive.” In a statement, the Dyke March Collective accused Ms. Grauer’s organization, A Wider Bridge, which supports LGBT people in Israel, of “using Israel’s supposed ‘LGBTQ tolerance’ to ‘pinkwash’ the violent occupation of Palestine.” Sadly, this episode exhibited a shameful and unfair bias towards Israel driven by a desire to see Israel in the most negative light. Balaam the prophet would have agreed with the tactic.

After being hired by Balak, king of Moab, to curse the Jewish nation, the wicked prophet Balaam asked to be taken to a location from which he could see the Israelite camp. Twice we learn that Balaam saw not the entire camp, but only a portion of it. During the first of three curse attempts we read that, “Balak took Balaam and brought him up into Bamoth-baal, and he saw from there part of the people.” (22:41) For the third and final curse attempt Balak suggest that Balaam, “Come please with me to another place, from where you may see them; you shall see but the smallest part of them and not them all; and curse me them from there.” (23:13) Why does Balak only want Balaam to see part of the nation? Netziv, in his *Ha’amek Davar* commentary (on verse 13) explains that Balak wanted the prophet to see *b’ayin ra’ah*—with an “evil eye.” This term refers to a slanted and negative view of others, which can stem from jealousy, hatred or animosity. In his desire to curse the Jewish people, Balak hoped that he could show Balaam only a small part of the nation—the negative part—and that this slanted perspective would inspire Balaam to curse the Jewish nation.

Today, too many consider this very same *ayin hara* perspective an appropriate attitude towards the Jewish state. Rather than seeing the whole picture, they choose to view Israel through a warped lens that shines a spotlight only on the negative without any balance, nuance or perspective. The most egregious perpetrator of this tunnel vision is the United Nations Human Rights Council, which reserves an agenda item each session specifically to criticize Israel for its human rights violations, and even [blames Israel for spousal abuse](#) in the Palestinian territories. We also find this same “evil eye” within the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement which blames Israel—and only Israel—for the absence of peace, and then attacks the Jewish state with a moral code applied exclusively to Israel. From the warped perspective of BDS, because Israel alone is an illegitimate aggressor, it alone must be punished economically.

However, the prophet Balaam, who was hoping to see only negative and curse Israel, could not follow through. As soon as he saw the camp he cried out, “How goodly are your tents, O Jacob!” (24:5) Rashi (on verse 2) notes that Balaam saw the modest layout of the tents in the camp and the sensitivity that the Israelites had for one-another. Even when he wanted to see negative, Balaam could not avoid the positive traits open for all to see. Today we must continue to fight against those who refuse to honestly look at Israel without bias. We must label *ayin hara* against Israel when we see it, whether in the UN or on our college campuses. Israel is, of course, not perfect. But if a coworker or schoolmate can see the negative side of the Jewish State, we must insist—and help them—see the positive side as well. ■

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