

JUNE 25, 2018

Parashat Balak

Malicious Blessings

How good are your tents, Jacob (Numbers 24:5)

מה טוב אהליך יעקב (במדבר כד:ה)

Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov mishkenotecha Yisrael, “How good are your tents, Jacob: your dwelling places, Israel.” Ironically, these words from *Parashat Balak* were first uttered by one of the Jewish people’s greatest enemies, Balaam the Wicked. While God forced his tongue to translate his curse into a blessing, Balaam’s intentions were far from praising the Israelites.

How then can we decipher Balaam’s true curse? Rashi teaches that the answer lies in the language of Balaam’s forced blessing. He notes that the Sages of the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 105a) explain that the “tents” refer to “houses of study” and “dwelling places” to “houses of prayer.” In blessing our “tents” and our “dwelling places,” Balaam’s true intent was to curse and destroy the Israelite’s houses of study and prayer. Balaam understood that at the core of Judaism lies wisdom, morality and ethics, all which emerge from the teachings of the Torah and are inculcated in “houses of study” and “houses of prayer.” Balaam planned to strip the Jewish people of these powers.

In this interpretation also lies the answer to how the nation of Israel overcame Balaam’s onslaught and how the nation will continue to thrive in the face of assaults and ongoing confrontation. Despite those who choose to curse our nation, God’s forced translation of the curse teaches us that our strength comes from our “tents” and “dwelling places.” When we stand firm, and abide by the principles of our tradition and the pride we have as a nation, we will succeed in prevailing against those who seek our demise.

Monitoring the events transpiring on the Gaza border over the past couple of months, it is clear that while some in Gaza seek to peacefully assemble, Hamas and other terrorists follow in the footsteps of Balaam. Hamas leaders have shown that their goal is not peaceful change, but rather the destruction of the Jewish state. “Palestine and Jerusalem belong to us...We will break the walls of the blockade, remove the occupation entity and return to all of Palestine,” said [Ismail Haniyeh](#), Chairman of Hamas Political Bureau.

Israel has discovered at least 10 improvised explosive devices (IEDs) at the Israel-Gaza fence, eight armed terrorists have hurled pipe bombs and grenades at IDF soldiers, and Gazans have launched dozens of incendiary devices into Israel to set ablaze her fields and communities. Through it all, Hamas continues to incite violence and endanger Israelis and Palestinians, instructing Gazans to “Bring a knife, a dagger or a gun” to rallies and “kidnap Israeli civilians.”

Yet despite Hamas’s ongoing violence, Israel has not only committed to defending her citizens, but also embraced the lesson revealed in this week’s *parasha*: holding true to our Jewish values in the face of adversity. Israel has worked to improve the lives of Palestinians in Gaza via [projects](#) in water, sanitation, electricity, and communications. Just this week in a beautiful display of empathy with the innocent citizens of Gaza, Israeli children and residents of Kibbutz Nir Am, which has suffered several fires sparked by burning kites flown from Gaza, launched [balloons](#) carrying candy toward the Palestinian enclave.

Like the ancient Israelites in *Parashat Balak*, Israel continues to face the wrath of those who intend to curse her. Following in the steps of our ancestors, we also continue to hold true to our Jewish values through supporting Israel's right to self-defense and her embrace of ethical and moral action despite the challenges she faces. ■

Balaam's True Colors

And Balaam arose early in the morning (Numbers 22:21)

ויקם בלעם בבקר (במדבר כב:כא)

In a recent cabinet meeting, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu recounted ongoing conversations with Russian President Vladimir Putin and U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, reiterating to them the importance and current process of “acting against Iran’s attempts to establish itself” in Syria. The Kremlin also reported on these efforts, citing discussions of “joint efforts to provide security near the Syrian-Israeli border.” Finally, these sentiments were further echoed during Pompeo and Netanyahu’s discussions of concerns regarding Iran-backed militia operating in Syria.

During this week’s *parasha*, the Jewish people pass through the territory of Moab. Balak, the King of Moab, intends to wage war against the Jews, but fears the strength of Israelites. Balak hires the spiritual master, Balaam, to wage a “metaphysical war” against the Jewish people through incendiary curses to weaken and ultimately demolish the Jews.

In describing Balaam’s personality, the Mishnah (*Pirkei Avot 5:22*) compares his “evil eye” with the “good eye” of Abraham, a comparison that can be better understood by further comparing their respective actions. While the Torah reports that both Abraham and Balaam rose early in the morning and saddled a donkey (Genesis 22:3 and Numbers 22:21), Rashi notes nuance in the text. In Hebrew, the word for “saddled,” “*yach vosh*,” is closely related to the verb “to conquer.” The word for donkey, “*chamor*,” resembles the word for physicality, “*chomer*.” This suggests that when Abraham “saddled his donkey,” he also conquered his physical drives to fulfill the divine command, a reference to Abraham leaving his donkey behind when ascending the mountain to sacrifice Isaac on the altar and submitting to higher authority.

Balaam, however, arose early in the morning to scheme the downfall of others, all in the pursuit of wealth and glory. Ultimately, the donkey receives the prophecy, symbolically emphasizing Balaam’s animalistic desires and materialism. Balaam’s true colors come through—his intentions were egocentric and he was willing to annihilate those in his tracks, earning Balaam the title of one of the greatest adversaries in Jewish history. Today, Israel faces similar enemies who too are determined to destroy the Jewish people and displace them from their beloved home.

A bipartisan [letter](#) sent by 43 U.S. Representatives to Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in 2017 noted: “Should Iran be allowed to maintain a permanent presence in Syria, it would pose a significant threat to Israel, Jordan, and United States interests. A permanent Iranian presence in Syria would connect Lebanon-based Hezbollah to Iran via Iraq and Syria.” According to former U.S. National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, the Iranians fuel and accelerate cycles of violence as a strategy to take advantage of weak states, forcing their dependence on Iranian support. [Iran](#) remains the leading state sponsor of terrorism: financing, arming and training terrorist groups and brutal regimes such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and Assad, which has repeatedly used chemical weapons against its own citizens. Learning from Balaam’s actions in this week’s *parasha*, it is evident that we must defend Israel against the egocentric destruction our enemies inflict upon us. ■

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