

Parshat Balak: The Roots of Jewish Identity

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The image of a man from Aram arising early to ride a donkey en route to a mission of critical importance can of course be applied equally, as so many have noted, to Bilaam as it can to Avraham¹. When one factors in the fact that each of these men are described as sources of blessings to allies and of curses to enemies, one has an unmistakable match. For this reason, the Sages saw fit to contrast Avraham's generosity of spirit, modesty, and understated nature with Bilam's avarice, arrogance, and insatiable appetite².

In truth, the specter of Avraham looms over the *sedra* in ways that far surpass even the obvious connection to Bilaam. The nation of Moab, led by the outsider king Balak, willfully fails to recognize that the Jewish people mean them no harm. While the Jewish people request safe passage through the plains of Moab to the Jordan, Moab wantonly denied such passage³, despite all that Avraham had done for their ancestor, Lot. If the Jewish people had militaristic intentions, surely such a rejection would have represented the time to strike a decisive blow against Moab.

Yet, following in the footsteps of Avraham, the Jewish people do not look for conflict with Lot's descendants, but instead, simply turn in the other direction, and part ways. Outrageously, the people of Moab seek to harm the Jewish people through engaging Bilam's services, and later, through sending their daughters to seduce the Jewish men at Ba'al Pe'or⁴. In so doing, they demonstrate both utter disregard for both the historical record of Avraham's multiple kindnesses to Lot, and the Jewish people's unequivocal rejection of any form of violence against Moab, as an ongoing expression of family loyalty.

Moab, as a culture, failed to cultivate historical sensitivity, which led to a lack of moral depth. It did not understand its own roots, and therefore, rejected what ought to have been a deep, profound sense of obligation to Avraham's descendants⁵. It is interesting that, for this reason, the Torah bans any male Moabite from fully joining the Jewish community, even following conversion⁶, in a striking, categorical rejection of a culture that failed to integrate the characteristic of kindness, despite having had the necessary exposure to the paragon of kindness, Avraham.

By contrast, then, our own annual exposure to Parshat Balak requires us to renew our sense of connection not only to our own founding patriarch, but to the deepest roots of our

¹ Genesis 22:3, Numbers 22:21.

² Avot Chapter 5

³ Judges 11:17

⁴ Numbers 25:1

⁵ See Ramban BeMidbar 23:9 who notes that even Bilaam recognized that Moab was behaving with a profound disregard for their historical debt of gratitude to Avraham.

⁶ Deuteronomy 23:5. See commentary of Ramban (ad loc.) who notes the lack of historical gratitude displayed by both of the nations which emerged from Lot, Moab and Ammon.

national identity. In other words, we are not, and cannot be, rootless Moab, morally stunted, ignorant of ourselves.

It is in Parshat Balak that we are reminded of the unique Jewish code of modesty, “how goodly are your tents, O Jacob⁷”. It is in Parshat Balak that we read of the intimacy which characterizes our relationship with God, “the friendship [*teruat*] of the king is within him⁸”. It is in Parshat Balak that we confront that most tragic but undeniable verse, “for they are a nation that dwells alone, and is not considered amongst the nations⁹”, that our national moral-ethical mission cannot be wholly translated into universalist terms, and that our geopolitical fate is, in essence, a solitary one.

It seems to me that it is for this reason, because Parshat Balak crystallizes and distills our historic identity into its purest social, religious, and national form that the Sages wished to institute a reading of the parshah twice daily in Keriat Shema¹⁰, and only forewent that option on the basis of a concern for the duration of daily services. Moral-historical self-awareness, stretching back to the days of Avraham, is a hallmark of the nation which has been so often commanded to remember, ‘zachor’.

⁷ Numbers 24:5

⁸ Numbers 23:21, following the interpretation of Rashi.

⁹ Numbers 23:9

¹⁰ Babylonian Talmud Berachot 12b