

“Curse Less; Bless More”

Parashat Balak

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I have no idea what Henry Kissinger looks like these days...but I sure do know what he sounds like. Last Sunday while on a long car ride, I was listening to a CNN interview of Kissinger with Fareed Zakaria on XM radio. Did you know that Henry Kissinger is 99 years old? 99 years old and still sharp as a tack. His deep voice and thick Bavarian accent aside, he was as up-to-date on geopolitical issues and his analysis was erudite as ever. Zakaria at one point asked him about Vladimir Putin, who Kissinger has met some 15 times over the course of his career, the first time when Putin was the deputy mayor of St. Petersburg. Why would he so brazenly, so fiercely attack a sovereign neighbor? What could possibly be going through his mind, Zakaria asked the sage diplomat...

Kissinger, who described Putin as having an almost mystical view of Russia and a deep nostalgia for the Soviet empire responded that Putin attacked because he knows that Russia is relatively weak, because he knows that Russia is suffering domestically, because he sees other nations surpassing Russia as global superpowers. Now you people know me well enough by now...what was I thinking about as I was listening to this interview? Why, the parasha of course!

If you happen to visit the Louvre in Paris, you can examine with your own eyes the Mesha Stele, also known as the Moabite Stone, a roughly four foot tall slab of black basalt, with inscriptions from the 9th Century BCE. That's an almost 3,000 years old rock. Discovered in 1868 by a Christian missionary named Klein, believe it or not, the stone contains 34 lines of ancient Canaanite inscriptions attesting to the presence of a powerful Moabite kingdom east of the Dead Sea. It also mentions Israel specifically, and conflict between the two nations. Moab had a long history of prominence and power, but ultimately succumbed to the Assyrians, and then disappeared from the map forever. With an ascendant Israelite nation saddling up beside them, Moab's king, Balak, attempts to defeat them, if not militarily, then spiritually. By hiring a renowned prophet, seer, soothsayer named Balaam, they join in an unholy alliance to curse the Jewish people.

Balaam and Balak, like Putin today, were beset by feelings of weakness and inadequacy. Rather than attempting to live at peace with their neighbors, they construe them as enemies. The Israelites didn't actually do anything to the Moabites. They didn't attack or advance against them. They were just there. Their very presence was a threat to Moab, *vayakatz Moav mipnei B'nai Yisrael*...Moab dreaded the Israelites, probably because they had a reputation for having an unbeatable deity on their side! I've always wondered why Balak, the King of Moav didn't employ Balaam **to bless the Moabites-his own people**, instead of **cursing the Israelites**. Balak fully believed that Balaam could do it. He said so himself: *ki yadati et asher t'varech m'vorach v'asher ta'or yu'ar*, I know that whomever you bless will be blessed, and whomever you curse will be cursed. Balak is a believer in Balaam's supernatural power. Why not hire him bless the Moabites with strength, with courage, with fortitude? He is so obsessed with fearing and hating the Israelites, he doesn't even think to bless his own people first!

This is a pattern that would repeat over and over in world history. How many regimes and empires, kingdoms and countries opted for scapegoating a certain people, too often those people were Jews, rather than addressing the actual ills, crises, challenges of their own countries? How

many would go to war with another nation in the pursuit of strength or power rather than growing that strength or power from within? How many would squander precious resources and opportunities, fixating on an external threat rather than devoting those resources to creating a thriving environment at home?

And sometimes we do it too! There is a phenomenon in psychology called blame shifting. People who have a hard time taking responsibility for their own problems tend blame their circumstances, their bad breaks or misfortunes on anyone but themselves. Sometimes those people are spouses or partners, children, co-workers, friends... This can be a form of emotional or verbal abuse. Have you ever been in a situation with someone where no matter what the issue is, it's somehow always your fault? Whenever you raise a concern or reflect on a conflict it is somehow turned around 360 degrees, and you're the reason everything went south? That's the same dynamic on an interpersonal scale as when nations, ancient and modern, imagine that all their problems are caused by someone else. But that blame shifting and scapegoating almost never works... It sure did backfire on Balak, just as it did with so many others who have attempted to deflect responsibility in their lives.

Many have wondered why we even read this fanciful story of a talking donkey, a wicked king, and a mercenary prophet... the Israelites are not even main characters in the story. They didn't even know it was happening. But I think the story illustrates something quite poignant... Jews are not the kind of people who go around cursing others. I know there are a few unfortunate exceptions to that rule, but overwhelmingly, it is our Torah that says, *Do not hate the Egyptian*. It is our Torah that says *Do not despise the Edomite*. It is our tradition that teaches—in Pirkei Avot—*Binfol oy'vecha al tismach*, do not rejoice in your enemy's downfall. Golda Meir once said, "The only way to eliminate war is to love our children more than we hate our enemies." And it was a text that we read several weeks ago on Shavuot, the Book of Ruth, that says that even a Moabite could be welcomed into the community of Israel, notwithstanding the fact that some considered it absolutely forbidden.

Today is *Shivah Asar Be'Tammuz*, a fast day if it wasn't Shabbat; the beginning of three weeks of mourning leading up to Tisha B'Av, when we remember the destruction of the *Batei Ha'Mikdash*, the Holy Temples in Jerusalem. It is absolutely clear, from a historical point of view, that the Babylonians destroyed the first Temple and the Romans destroyed the Second. But we don't spend these days despising ancient Rome or Babylonia. We don't curse Nebuchadnezzar. Do you even know which Roman Emperor was on the throne when the Second Temple was destroyed? The answer is Titus... but do we refuse to utter that name or teach our children how wicked he was? NO! On Tisha B'Av we talk about *sinat chinam*, about how Jews hated each other; how we weren't kind or respectful of our fellow Jews. And that, we teach our children, is why the Temple was destroyed. We are not seeking to shift any blame or scapegoat anyone else. Jewish theology of these events teaches that we didn't deserve these sacred places because we weren't living up to our highest ideals, because we weren't taking care of each other well enough. That's the opposite of blame shifting! Jews are always looking inward, sometimes a little neurotically, to figure out why various things occur in the world and what our role in them might be. The point is, rather than going around cursing others, the Jewish way is to go around blessing and being a blessing to others. I don't know about you, but I think that's a much healthier, much holier way of being in the world. Curse less, bless more. Shabbat Shalom!