

Shabbat Shalom.

Today's parsha, Balak, is yet another variation on that old, too familiar these: *They tried to kill us, we won, let's eat!* The eating part is more of a spiritual sustenance, but the attempt to do away with our people and G-d's intervention to prevent this was fortunately very real. Today's parsha is a rich story and it, as well as the haftorah, relay events that will be very meaningful for the future of our people.

Balak is king of Moab. In a nutshell, once he hears of the previous victories of the Israelites over two of his mighty neighbors, he fears the Moabites will suffer a similar fate. So he retains the powerful sorcerer, Bilam, to curse the Jewish people. However, in an interesting narrative that involves an angel, a talking donkey, and a very present G-d of Israel, we find that in spite his best efforts, instead of curses, only blessings can come out of Bilam's mouth, including prophecies concerning the Messianic redemption of the Jews. There are the two tie-ins with today's haftorah selection, which is from the prophet Micah. One, the haftorah actually references the story of Barak, Bilam, and the curses that turn to blessings, and two, both speak to the coming of the messiah and the final redemption. Also in the haftorah, Micah describes how G-d will remove the idols and sorcerers and destroy our enemies. He also goes on to rebuke the Jewish people for not observing G-d's commandments (another familiar theme) and reminds them of the great things G-d had done for them, like taking them out of Egypt and replacing curses with blessings. We'll read later how Micah calls on the "mountains and hills" as witnesses. I learned that the mountains and hills are thought to be references to our Patriarchs and Matriarchs.

While I was reading the haftorah, I was struck with how the same questions linger on for us, even after thousands of years. *How do we serve G-d? Why have we always, then and now, had trouble following G-d's commandments? What are we doing wrong? Are we doing anything right?* I don't have the answers to these questions, but I am awed by the fact that we Jews continue to ask the same questions, make the same mistakes, mess up, try harder, ask G-d for guidance, and continue to walk the earth. Being held accountable today to the same set of laws found in the same Torah that guided our ancestors is truly awesome to me...and I don't mean awesome like amazing, I mean awesome like filled with awe. G-d's patience with us seems to be infinite because we rarely permanently learn anything, yet we are still given so many chance to do better. In today's haftorah, Micah reminds our ancestors that all they need to do to get back on track is contained within Torah. And he Micah narrows the job down by saying what is really required of the Jewish people, bottom line, is to "*do justice, love kindness, and walk discreetly with your G-d.*" There are several interpretations of what "walk discreetly" might mean, but most allude to being humble in our interactions among people, and giving credit for the miracles around us to G-d.

Back from the haftorah to our parasha... where a worried King Balak has sent messengers to the Land of Midian, asking Bilam, a powerful non-Jewish prophet and sorcerer of great fame, to come and curse the Jews into defeat. But G-d appeared to Bilam that night and instructs him not to go to Moab, saying "*You shall not curse the people because they are blessed!*" Bilam decides to obey, but an insistent King Balak reentices him by promising great riches. Again G-d appears to Bilam, this time allowing the prophet to go -- provided that he only speak the words which G-d dictates to him. Bilam and some Moabite dignitaries depart. But their journey is interrupted when G-d sends an angel, with a drawn sword, to block Bilam's path. While Bilam can't see the angel, his she-donkey (girls are

smart?) does, and the donkey refuses to move onward, causing Balaam to strike her. Then the donkey miraculously speaks, admonishing Bilam for striking her. Eventually, G-d "opens Bilam's eyes," and he sees the angel too. In a conversation between Bilam and the angel, Bilam is chastised for his behavior toward his donkey, and reminded to say only what G-d dictates. Bilam continues to Moab where he instructs King Balak to build seven altars and make sacrifices to G-d. G-d "chances" upon Bilam, and dictates to him the words he should repeat to Balak which begin with: "*How can I curse whom G-d has not cursed, and how can I invoke wrath if the Lord has not been angered?*" and ends with showering the Israelites with beautiful blessings and praises. Balak responds angrily to all of this but Bilam reminds him he can only say that which G-d tells him to say.

Twice King Balak tries taking Bilam to different locations with pretty much the same results. After the third time the alters are built and offerings to G-d are made, Bilam speaks again and this time the blessing that ensues is one that is very familiar to us: "*How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel! ... G-d, who has brought them out of Egypt with the strength of His loftiness He shall consume the nations which are his adversaries ... Those who bless [them] shall be blessed, and those who curse [them] shall be cursed.*" Bilam issues this blessing as he looks down at the Jewish camps from the heights of Peor, and he is struck by their beauty, their modesty, and the people's respect for one another. The commentaries address the "goodly tents" of our ancestors, which have become the houses of prayer and learning that exist in every Jewish community today. After twenty-four hundred years we still commune with G-d in our houses of prayer. Thirty-three centuries after Sinai, the Torah is still studied, expounded and debated in our houses of learning. This is an ancient blessing we have held onto, and it has been said that this blessing will restore all others to us. I'm sure you'll agree this is a timely blessing for our congregation: That the beauty of our prayer,

modest of our spirits, and respect for each other depends less on the location or size of our sanctuary, and more on our commitment to what is good and right.

Since Bilam has failed three times to curse the Jews, King Balak despairs of accomplishing his goal and sends Bilam away. But for his own gain, before he leaves, Bilam offers advice about how to accomplish a downfall of Israel: *Lead the men lead into harlotry with the women of Moab*. Unfortunately this works. (she donkey) Moabite and Midianite women seduce some of the Jewish men and entice them to worship one of their deviant (de) dieties. G-d commands Moses to execute the guilty parties and a plague simultaneously erupts among the Jews. One Jewish leader publicly displays the Midianite princess with whom he has been consorting and both he and his mistress are zealously killed by Aaron's grandson Phineas, whose full name, I am humbled to say, includes Pinchas. This halts the plague against the Israelites, but not before it has caused thousands of deaths.

There are many commentaries which offer interesting points to consider regarding this parsha and I'd like to briefly share a few:

First, why would we name a parsha for an evil person who wished only to curse the Jews? In the whole torah, there are only six parshas named for individual people: Noah, Sarah, Jethro, Korah, Balak and Phinehas, and except for Balak, these are all righteous people. Rabbi Yossi Lew, an assistant Chabad rabbi in Georgia, suggests the parsha is named Balak to emphasize the powerful transformation required to change a sinister curse into a blessing. The greatness of the blessings uttered by Bilam lie in the fact that they contain words regarding the ultimate transformation of the entire world! Bilam is both a powerful sorcerer and a famed prophet. In addition to inadvertently blessing the Jews, he makes four

prophecies, one a specific reference to the Jewish Messiah and the ultimate destruction of the nations who seek to destroy Israel. In today's parsha he prophesizes about two anointed kings, the first king of Israel, David, who will save the Jewish people from her oppressors, and the final anointed king, the Moshiach or Messiah, who will save Israel in the end of days. Bilam's prophecy states "*I see it, but not now* (referring to David) and, *I perceive it, but not in the near future* (referring to the Messiah).

In fact, Balak himself embodies this very transformation. Talmud relates that the Biblical figure Ruth, who transformed her own life by converting to Judaism and who became the great-grandmother of King David, was a direct descendant of King Balak. Therefore, the Moshiach, who will usher in the era of ultimate transformation through the redemption of the Jews and the world, must then come from the same lineage of King David... the Messiah will be a direct descendant of this King Balak. That's a definite 180 degree turn. In this week's Texas Jewish Post, Rabbi Dan Lewan shares his opinion that Jewish philosophical thought implies a perfect world demands "*not only flashes of promise and prosperity, not only a world of protection from danger, but one in which every enemy eventually becomes followers.*" Barak creates the possibility for such ultimate transformation when he elicits Bilam's blessings and prophecies, that he warrants a torah portion in his name.

At key moments in our lives, transformation is often. How many times, especially when faced with difficult choices, are we required to mature in knowledge or attitude, and completely change the way we normally behave by transforming ourselves to a new level of compassion, understanding, or generosity? How wonderful would it be to find the way to change the hearts of those who harbor ill will toward us, our loved ones, or society so they instead become a source of joy and support?

A second point: While Bilam, and King Balak, did not succeed in cursing the Israelites, they did succeed in tempting them to stray in ways which led to death by execution and plague in their day, and to the fulfillment of gloomier prophesies in later years. Yanki Tauber, an editor of Chabad.org. points out that while things will remain good for the Jewish people for a long while, but after the days of David and Solomon our people will abandon G-d, and as a direct result the Holy Temple will be destroyed, our ancestors will be expelled from their land, and persecuted for centuries to come. Tauber comments that *in the end, it could be said Bilam's curses prevailed!* G-d may have transformed them into blessings, but our people later transformed them back into the curses Bilam wanted to utter.

And a final point, related to the coming of the Moshiach, or the Messiah- In his commentary, Yanki Tauber describes how a question is answered on a website called (what else?) www.moshiah.com. He discusses how in the environments where many of us grew up, Moshiach is an alien, even a negative term. What does it really mean? Will it actually happen? This commentary widens the concept of the Moshiach to an idea we can all relate to. Tauber says think about your own behavior and ask yourself, *can I do better?* Ask yourself, *am I ever outraged by the cruelty and evil that exists in our world.?* Ask yourself *is there a reason why I'm here...a purpose to my life that makes it meaningful to get up out of bed in the morning.* The billions of people who do this everyday obviously believe we are going somewhere and someday we're going to get there. Well, Tauber continues, *for thousands of years Jews have had a word for this... "Moshiach".*

Unfortunately two things have happened that have made this word foreign to us. One, we have forgotten what the words once meant to our forefathers, and two, "messiah" became a Christian-oriented word in a faith that persecuted Jews to convince us to join them. Think not about the word, he says, but about what you

believe goodness in the world to mean, what we know to be true, and the ways each of us can bring about a better world.

There are clearly many meaningful ideas in today's parsha and haftorah. The story offers a great cast - a thwarted evil king, a powerful prophetic- sorcerer, a wise but mistreated talking donkey, and an angelic messenger, and the always impressionable Jewish people, in the hands of the greatest director of all time, G-d. The plot tells both a tale of long ago and also of today, a story about others and a story about ourselves. We all have our own way of receiving and imparting blessings and also curses. We all make predictions about what we think will happen. Each of us have scapegoats whom we blame when things go poorly. Who are your donkeys? And for whom have you been the donkey? We each have heroes and saviors who help us out of tight spots...Who are your angels? And when was the last time you were an angel for someone else? We are all creating modern day abodes and work places which we hopefully fill with respectful, modesty, and goodness. I'm a big list maker. I think each of us has a mental road map with which we are consciously or subconsciously, continuously checking in: Who am I? Where am I? Where am I going in life and how will I get there? Let's all remember to add to our daily to-do lists, *how can I best and most often be as a blessing in the world today?*

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