

Parshah Balak

Sermon – Friday July 19, 2019

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As I have begun my D'var Torah many times in the past, when I have had the privilege to deliver such a sermon, I have frequently quoted from Pirket Avot (Ethics of the Fathers, Chapter 4.1), Ben Zoma states four very important questions of ethics. The first is "*Who is Wise?*" The answer is one who learns from everyone. And so I have reviewed commentaries from Jonathan Sacks, King Solomon, the prophets Malachi, Amos, Isaiah, and very important, an article entitled, "*Are Jews treated differently?*" by Rabbi WW Jacobson, published in 2010.

One of the most profound and influential comments ever made about Jewish destiny was made by the Pagan prophet Balaam in this week's Sedra.

"As I see them from the mountaintops, gaze on them from the heights, behold is a people that dwells alone, and is not reckoned among the nations." This concept of the Jewish people is as true today as it was 3300 years ago when Balaam described the Israelite nation.

And the parables continue:

How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel, sung as the first prayer in the morning service. And Balaam continues:

He (the Jew) crouches like a lion, like a lioness, who will dare rouse him, blessed is he that blesses you, and cursed is he that curses you..." this statement is the exact statement that God said to Abraham in Genesis, when God told Abraham that he will bless those who bless Abraham and curse those who curse Abraham.

What is more, the most explicit reference in the Torah to Moshiach, the Jewish leader who will bring about the full redemption, when heaven and earth will kiss and humanity will become truly one, is to be found in Balaam's prose: "A star shall come forth from Jacob, and a scepter shall rise up from Israel." (Numbers, chapter 24). This is very strange. The identity, nature and calling of the Jewish people is naturally discussed abundantly throughout the Bible. Yet the fact remains that the most acute, potent and finely tuned appreciation of Jewish identity is communicated through the mouth of a non-Jewish prophet who loathes Israel and attempts to destroy it. Why?

The message, I believe, is quite clear. The Torah is teaching that if you wish to understand who the Jew is, you must seek the perspective of the non-Jew! The non-Jewish individual, who is unbiased and unaffected by the "Jewish complex" and its inclination toward self-depreciation, possesses a keener appreciation of the Jew than many Jews themselves. Although the non-Jew may not be able to put his or her finger on what that otherness is, the non-Jew feels that Israel "is a people that dwells alone and is not reckoned among the nations." (Parshah Balak, Numbers, 23:9-10)

To many Jews and non-Jews admirers and critics alike, one has seen to epitomize the Jewish situation of people that stand outside history and the normal laws governing the faith of nations. For Jews it was a source of pride. For non-Jews, it was all too often a source of resentment and hate. For centuries, Jews in Christian Europe were treated, (in Max Weber's

phrase (the famous German sociologist) (1864-1920), the Jews were treated as a “pariah people.” All agreed, though, that Jews were different. The question is: how and why? The biblical answer is surprising and profound.

It is not that Jews alone knew God. That is manifestly not the case. Balaam – the very prophet who uttered these words – was not an Israelite. Nor were Abimelech or Laban, to whom God speaks in the book of Genesis. Abraham’s contemporary, Malkizedek, King of Shalem (the city that later became Jerusalem) is described as a priest of the most high God. Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, was a Midianite high priest, yet the Sedra that contains the supreme moment of Jewish history – the revelation at Mount Sinai – bears his name. Even the Pharaoh who ruled Egypt in the days of Joseph said of him, “Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?”

God does not appear only to Jews, members of the covenantal nation. Nor does He answer only Jewish prayers. At the dedication of the Temple, King Solomon made the following request:

As for the foreigner who does not belong to Your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of Your name — for men will hear of Your great name and Your mighty hand and Your outstretched arm-when he comes and prays toward this temple, then hear from heaven, Your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of You, so that all the peoples of the earth may know Your name and fear You, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears Your Name.

The sages continued this great tradition when they said that “the righteous of the nations of the world have a share in the world to come.” Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem, contains the names of more than 20,000 righteous gentiles who saved lives during the Holocaust years.

Nor is it that God’s covenant with the children of Israel means that they are more righteous than others. Malachi, last of the prophets, has striking words to say on the subject:

From where the sun rises to where it sets, My name is honored among the nations, and everywhere incense and pure oblation (peace offering) are offered to My name, for My name is honored among the nations, says the Lord of hosts.(Malachi 1:11-12)

Nor did any of the major strands in Jewish thought ever see Jewish chosen-ness as a privilege. It was, and is, a responsibility. The key verse here is the famous prophecy of Amos:

*You alone have I singled out of all the families of the earth –
That is why I will call you to account for all your iniquities. (Amos 3:2)*

Where then did Jewish singularity lie? The clue lies in the precise wording of Balaam’s blessing: “Behold it is a people that dwells alone.” For it was as a people that God chose the descendants of Abraham; as a people that He made a covenant with them at Mount Sinai; as a people that He rescued them from Egypt, gave them laws, and entered into their history. “You will be to Me,” He said at Sinai, “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Judaism is the only

religion to place God at the center of its self- definition as a nation. Jews are the only nation whose very identity is defined in religious terms.

There were many nations in the ancient world who had national gods. There were other religions – Judaism's two daughter faiths, Christianity and Islam – that believed in a universal God and a universal religion. Only Judaism believed, and still believes, in a universal God accessible to all, yet peculiarly manifest in the way of life, fate and destiny of a single and singular people:

You are my witnesses, declares the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen; you are my witnesses, declares the Lord, that I am God. (Isaiah 43:10-12)

Israel, in its history and laws, would be God's witness. It would testify to something larger than itself. So it proved to be. The historian Barbara Tuchman wrote:

"The history of the Jews is intensely peculiar in the fact of having given the Western world its concept of origins and monotheism, its ethical traditions, and the founder of its prevailing religion, yet suffering dispersion, statelessness and ceaseless persecution, and finally in our times nearly successful genocide, dramatically followed by fulfillment of the never-relinquished dream of return to their homeland. Viewing this strange and singular history, one cannot escape the impression that it must contain some special significance for the history of mankind, that in some way, whether one believes in divine purpose or inscrutable circumstance, the Jews have been singled out to carry the tale of human fate."

Why, if God is the God of the universe, accessible to every human being, should He choose one nation to bear witness to His presence in the human arena? This is a profound question, as noted by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.

There is no short answer. But at least part of the answer is this. God is wholly Other. Therefore He chooses a people who would be humanity's 'other'. That is what Jews were – outsiders, different, distinctive, a people who swam against the tide and challenged the idols of the age. Judaism is the counter-voice in the conversation of mankind.

During two thousand years of dispersion, Jews were the only people who, as a group, refused to assimilate to the dominant culture or convert to the dominant faith. They suffered as a result – but what they taught was not for themselves alone. They showed that a nation does not need to be powerful or large to win God's favor. They showed that a nation can lose everything else – land, power, rights, a home – and yet still not lose hope. They showed that God is not necessarily on the side of great empires or big battalions. They showed that a nation can be hated, persecuted, reviled, and yet still be loved by God. They showed that to every law of history there is an exception and what the majority believes at any given moment is not necessarily true. Judaism is God's question-mark against the conventional wisdom of the age.

It is neither an easy nor a comfortable fate to be "a people that dwells alone", as Balaam stated, but it is a challenging and inspirational one.

I would like to conclude with three quotations from non-Jews about the Jewish people. The uniqueness of the Jew keenly perceived by the non-Jewish world is expressed by the following famous non-Jewish people

The splendorous words of the Great Russian novelist, Leo Mikolaivitch Tolstoy, wrote this in 1908 about the Jewish people:

“The Jew is that sacred being, who has brought down from Heaven the everlasting fire, and has illumined with it the entire world. He is the religious source, spring, and fountain out of which all the rest of the peoples have drawn their beliefs and their religions. The Jew is the emblem of eternity. He, who neither nor slaughter nor torture thousands of years could destroy, he who neither fire, nor sword, nor Inquisition was able to wipe off the face of the earth. He, who is the first to produce the Oracles of God. He, who has been for so long the guardian of the prophecy, and who transmitted it to the rest of the world. Such a nation cannot be destroyed. The Jew is as everlasting as is eternity itself.”

Here is a passage by contemporary historian Paul Johnson:

“All the great conceptual discoveries of the intellect seem obvious and inescapable once they have been revealed, but it requires a special genius to formulate them for the first time. The Jew has this gift. To them we owe the idea of equality before the law, both divine and human; of the sanctity of life and the dignity of the human person; of the individual conscience and so a personal redemption; of a collective conscience and so of social responsibility; of peace as an abstract ideal and love as the foundation of justice, and many other items which constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind. Without the Jews it might have been a much emptier place.”

And finally, the immortal words of the 19th century American president John Adams:

“I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize man than any other nation. If I was an atheist who believed or pretended to believe that all is ordered by chance, I should believe that chance has ordained the Jews to preserve and propagate to all mankind the doctrine of a supreme, intelligent, wise, almighty sovereign of the universe, which I believe to be the great essential principle of all Morality and consequently of all Civilization.”

In conclusion, I would state that the views on anti-Semitism resurrected during the middle and latter part of the 20th century across the world and the absolutely irrational obsession to demonize Israel is beginning to open many of our eyes. If you open almost any newspaper in the world or watch any television news station internationally, you can hear the message articulated 3300 years ago by a sophisticated and spiritual non-Jew and that is Balaam in this week's Sedra. “It is a people that dwells alone, and is not reckoned among the nations.”

This is not a curse; it is a reality. If we wish to survive and thrive, we must embrace this truth acknowledged long ago by our fellow non-Jewish inhabitants: “The world will only appreciate Jews when we will possess the courage to appreciate and love ourselves.” Says Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. Paradoxically, only when we acknowledge our ‘aloneness’ as Balaam has said, will we become a true source of blessing to all of humanity.

Shabbat Shalom