

Balak - Rabbi Lerner - June 16, 2013

Balak and Bnei Yisrael in Arvos Moav

22:2-3: *And Balak the son of Tzippor saw all that Israel had done to the Emori. Moav became very frightened of the people, because it was numerous, and Moav was disgusted in the face of Bnei Yisrael - They detested their lives. A question raised is that here is why does it say Vayar - he saw - while at other times it is Vayishmah, he heard (as with Yisro)? Sometimes seeing means hearing, as at Har Sinai where it says *Ha'am Ro'im es Hakolos* - the words are often interchangeable. **Oznayim LaTorah:** Yisro was far away and had to have heard what happened in Egypt - he couldn't have seen it; but Bnei Yisrael conquered the kingdom of Sichon the Emori which was on the doorstep of Moav; they knew that the Jews were at their gates; they saw the battle and that the Jews were right there.*

Sforno: Balak had a great reputation as a fierce warrior - he was famed for his military knowledge; there is a pasuk in Sefer Shoftim 11:25 that implies that he was a great warrior, with Yiftach questioning the king of Ammon, asking him if he felt he was better than Balak Ben Tzippor who would not come out to do battle with Am Yisrael. And yet Balak saw that when the Jews wanted to pass through Sichon's land to enter Israel, and Sichon refused and came to attack, the Jews destroyed him - Balak saw that this victory was accomplished without a normal, human strategy of war and it sent tremendous fear throughout the land of Canaan, and through Balak in particular. **Rashi:** it was the defeat of Sichon and Og - these two major, mighty kingdoms - they were completely destroyed by the Jews, to the surprise and horror of all the surrounding peoples - this frightened Balak. **Midrash Tanchuma:** all of the surrounding nations were afraid when the Jews left Egypt, and they paid protection money to Sichon and Og because they were the superpowers of the region, and after they were so easily defeated, they were terrified.

22:4: *Moav said to the elders of Midian, "Now the congregation will lick up our entire surroundings, as an ox licks up the greenery of the field." Balak, son of Tzippor, was king of Moav at that time.* Why this seeming repetition? Why first say here that he was the king? Why didn't the first pasuk say *Vayar Balak Melech Moav*? And why add *at that time* - of course he was the king at that moment - when else would he be the king? This pasuk doesn't make sense. **Ramban:** this phrase doesn't make sense in this pasuk, as it should have said it early on in the introduction to the section? It is possible that he was not king at first, but after they all become so frightened, they appointed him king because he was mighty warrior. **Rabbeinu Bachya:** Balak was the king of Moav - it should have said this in the first pasuk; that is when his title should have been mentioned. However, the Torah is deliberately doing this, to show how incredibly paralyzed with fear Balak was after the fall of Sichon and Og. From that day when the Emori kings fell, Balak did not feel like a king anymore; if the powerful kings couldn't defend their lands, he is like nothing in comparison; that is why the Torah just mentions his name without a title; his self-image was shot. He felt there was nothing more he could do to lead his nation to protect them.

Earlier, at the end of Chukas: 21:21-22: *Bnei Yisrael sent messengers to Sichon, king of the Emori, saying "Let me pass through your land; we shall not turn off to field of vineyard; we shall not drink well water; on the king's road (Derech Hamelech) we will travel, until we pass through your border."* Moshe was telling them that they had no designs on their land, they won't stray onto their fields. The Jews were coming from the east, from what is called the Midbar Hagadol. Moshe said they will traverse the derech hamelech - this is a north-south highway running east of the land of Israel. Sichon refused and gathered his troops to do battle; the Jews were forced to fight and they destroy them - 21:24-25: *Israel smote him with the edge of the sword and took possession of his land, from Arnon to*

east bank; Moshe would have been more than happy not taking those lands, and that is why he proposed peace first; but they forced the battle against the Jews and he had to respond.

Rabbeinu Bachya: A pasuk in Mishlei 14:28 *A large number of people brings glory to the king (berov am hadras melech), but without a regime, rulership is broken.* When it comes to kings in general, his power all goes by number of people who follow him - the size of one's army determines one's strength. This explains something: a king feels tremendously vulnerable, and he depends on the people who are his army, allowing him to continue to reign. His strength and glory comes from his having a lot of people behind him. Hashem's attitude towards a king is very ambivalent. In Devarim 17:14-15: *When you come to the Land that Hashem, your God, has given you, and possess it and settle in it, any you will say "I will set a king over myself, like all the rest of the nations that are around me." You shall surely place upon you a king whom Hashem, your God, shall choose; from among your brothers shall you set a king over yourself; you cannot place over yourself a foreign man, who is not your brother.* This command seems like an optional choice of the people, but we know it is one of the three mitzvos placed upon the people when they enter the land; it is one of the commandments. So when they finally asked for a king, why was Shmuel angry, and why did Hashem say they were rebelling against Him? The formulation of this command, of this mitzvah, shows the ambivalence, that it has to be from the people's groundswell. Hashem will give in only because the people want it. The reason is that the power of the king only depends on the power of the people - more power if larger numbers. This is exactly against what the Torah is against - He wants us to call out to Him, not to build strength from the number of people. We see that from these kings and their power and concerns - there is no real religious attitude of having a king who must always depend on the people. Balak sees that he must turn to outside people to save his throne.

What was Balak really worried about? Did he have something to really be afraid of? Moav was not supposed to be attacked by the Jews - the Jews were never to capture the lands of the children of Lot? When Lot's daughters gave their children names in Beraishis, 19:37-8: the older daughter named her child Moav, while the younger one called him Ben-Ami. **Rashi:** Moav - she was very brazen, without shame that she had committed incest with her father - she openly called him Moav, from my father; the second daughter was more discrete. Her reward was that for the nation of Ammon the Jews were not allowed to touch them at all; but Moav, while not allowed to be conquered by Bnei Yisrael, they could be terrorized. The Jews started skirmishes to frighten them. That is why they felt a terror. But Ammon was not afraid at all because of the guarantee from Hashem.

Addendum: The Haftorah of Chukas is based entirely on the outcome of this war against Sichon. The king of Ammon began a war against Bnei Yisrael, claiming that we took his land, meaning his sister-land of Moav. That claim was based on the fact that Eretz Sichon was originally Moav's, and in his mind the fact that Sichon conquered it didn't change its status as belonging to Moav and Ammon. Yiftach rejected that argument, since conquest by Sichon turned it into Eretz HaEmori. This confrontation and subsequent war was 300 years later, and they were still arguing over the issue! Apparently, Palestinians never give up claiming that the land is still theirs.