

A Shabbat Message of Torah from Rabbi Rheins

Curses to Blessings

Imagine a situation when the head of a nation rallies his people to curse a caravan of strangers. Imagine that leader hiring the best of the talking heads to lend those curses an aura of authenticity. Alas, it is not too hard to imagine such a scenario because we have witnessed it in just about every age and generation---including this one. This week's Torah portion, *Balak*, provides one of the oldest and certainly most famous examples of demagogues demonizing a desperate people. Fortunately, it also provides an antidote to such abuse of power.

Balak, the King of Moab, wanted to curse the Children of Israel. Balaam, a famous seer of the day, wanted a pay day. Together they conspired in an attempt to keep our ancestors from the Promised Land. It was in the 40th year after our exodus from Egypt and the giddy joy of freedom had long since morphed into a slow slog through the desert wilderness. We were miraculously nourished by surprising finds of water and a seed-like food that floated down from the sky---that the people called "What's-That" or "Whatchamacallit," which in Hebrew is called "*manna*." But now, just on the border of our ancestral home, the land of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the King of Moab sought to turn us back. So Balak hired the seer Balaam to hold a public rally and pronounce a divine curse on Israel. In an almost comic twist, Balaam, rushed to reap his reward but the famous visionary was blind to what even the ass he was riding could see. Stumbling and crashing into stone walls, Balaam cursed his poor animal and threatened to kill it only to be confronted by an angel who came to the rescue and saved the ass (and Balaam's as well).

Eventually, Balaam set up a series of altars and performed sacrifices and incantations in vain attempts to curse Israel, satisfy Balak, and earn his reward. But every time he tried to utter a curse, it came out a blessing. Indeed, the best known of Balaam's curses-turned-blessings is a beloved part of our morning service. To this day, Jews sing "*Mah tovu ohalekha Yaakov, mishk'notekha Yisrael*, How good are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel" (Numbers 24:5).

What exactly did Balaam see? The Talmud speculates that he saw that the openings to the Israelite tents did not face one another in order for each to give neighbors some measure of privacy and respect (Baba Batra 60a). Once he saw how our ancestors treated each other with such sensitive concern and modesty, he was ashamed to go through with his intended curses.

The antagonists of this story, Balak and Balaam, are not portrayed as two-dimensional bad guys. Rather, Balak had learned that Israelites defeated some neighboring regimes and was fearful of what would happen to his kingdom of Moab. He acted out of concern for the welfare of his nation and not out of a pure racial or ethnic hatred. And, yes, Balaam was hired to curse, but it is important to note that he did so reluctantly (Numbers 22:13-20; 34-8).

The complexities and implications of this story deeply resonate in our troubled times. We are plagued with leaders of every political stripe who are too quick to demonize and curse others. We have seemingly lost the ability or even the inclination to try and see the positive in those with whom we disagree.

Still, our tradition teaches us that even those filled with fear/rage and those bent on profiting from that fear can have their eyes opened in order to see the noble beauty that resides in every human being. Let us all look deeply, respectfully and sensitively into the lives of others. Let us move from fear to sympathy. Let us turn raging curses into nurturing blessings. And then we can all declare: *Mah tovu*, How good!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rick

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