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News

Parashat Balak 5780

Rabbi Ariel J Friedlander – 1st July 2020

In the world before this pandemic, many of us would go on holiday during the summer, perhaps travelling to other towns and countries, and often we would also take a break from synagogue services. Thus it is that the Torah portions for the summer months are relatively unknown. In recent years this week's *parasha Balak* has become famous as the one with the loquacious donkey (we had a talking equine long before "Shrek"), and it also has a wizard. It is a thrilling story:

Balak, the king of Moab, has seen how the Israelites have just crushed the Amorites in battle, and is afraid for his future. He sends for a successful sorcerer, Bilaam, to curse Moab's enemies so Balak's army can defeat them. The God of the Israelites has a chat with Bilaam, letting him know that this task is futile since the Israelites are under the protection of Adonai, but Bilaam takes the job anyway. During the journey to Moab, there is an exciting scene with a donkey.^[1] Upon Bilaam's arrival, when the time comes to curse the Israelites, he is only able to produce blessings. Israel, and Adonai are triumphant.

The dramatic high point of the story occurs when Bilaam surveys the Israelite camp and pronounces, "*Ma tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishkenotecha Yisrael*", "How beautiful are your tents, Jacob; your dwellings, O Israel."^[2] His original intention of cursing



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our ancestors has turned into a blessing. It is certainly encouraging to think that with God on our side, merely by looking at us, a powerful enemy can be moved from hatred to admiration.

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What is often glossed over, however, is that a few verses earlier Bilaam shares a rather different description of the Children of Israel:

As I see them from the mountain tops,
Gaze on them from the heights,
There is a people that dwells apart,
Not reckoned among the nations.^[3]

What does Bilaam mean when he refers to the Children of Israel as “a people that dwells apart”? Why don’t we count among the nations? Who does he think we are? Rashi takes the Hebrew literally, explaining that Bilaam sees that what distinguishes us is our Torah traditions. Through his experience, Bilaam has come to understand the unique nature of the covenantal relationship between Adonai and the Israelites. The late Chief Rabbi Dr. J H Hertz agreed with Rashi, writing that:

Israel has always been a people apart, a people isolated and distinguished from other peoples ... by the fact that it has been chosen as the instrument of a Divine purpose.^[4]

However, Hertz is also concerned that others do not misunderstand the meaning of being chosen. He proposes an alternative translation to the word “reckoned”, so that the final clause reads, “(Israel) does not conspire against the nations”. In this way, suggesting that we do not define ourselves in contrast to others, he hopes to protect us from anti-Semitic claims that the Jews believe themselves to be “superior” to anyone else. Certainly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such thoughts have been the source of much prejudice, and the motivation for persecution. Various parts of our liturgy have been changed or omitted in order to prevent any misunderstanding by our neighbours.^[5] Previous generations hoped that keeping a low profile might protect us. Today, we are beginning to realize the need to be more active in fighting prejudice wherever it exists in our community.

However we decide to combat the dangers of otherness in our world, we also grapple with finding our own understanding of what it means to be “a people apart”. Is there a place for that concept in our minds and hearts?

When Dr. Hertz speaks of us as being "the instrument of a Divine purpose" my thoughts go to a Hebrew word that describes the Jewish people as being apart, or separate. In Parshat Kedoshim, Adonai commands us to be holy ^[6] What does it mean, to be *kadosh*, to be holy? Another word that we use is 'sacred'. And what does that mean? It is connected to our relationship with God. The Hebrew root *kuf, dalet, shin* has the sense of being separate. To be holy is to be separate. And this is key in understanding how relationships work. There is something special about setting ourselves apart from something. We just need to figure out what that something is.

Earlier in the week, I asked one of my students what it means to be holy. He replied simply, to be closer to God. Is there something about separating that can bring us closer? And how may we achieve this?

Whether we see the Torah as a Divine mandate, or as an ancient self-help manual, with the *mitzvot* as exercises to develop the muscles of our souls; as we follow our interpretations of the commandments, might we be able to separate ourselves from the thoughts and behaviours that damage our relationships? Why not have a go? If we turn from anger, may it be easier to be kind. If we stop talking about ourselves, may it be quiet enough to hear someone else. If we let go of fear, may it be safe enough to offer our support to another. Let us learn how to dwell apart, and thus come closer to completing our task of turning curses into blessings, and healing the world.

[1] You can read all about it in Numbers 22:21-35

[2] Numbers 24:5

[3] Numbers 23:9

[4] The Pentateuch and Haftorahs, ed. Dr. J. H. Hertz, Soncino Press 1977, p 674

[5] Two examples that come to mind are the option to omit "*asher bachar banu*" (who has chosen us) from the Aleinu prayer, and the reading of "*Shefoch chamatcha ...*" (pour out Your wrath on those that do not know You) when opening the door for Elijah at the Passover Seder.

[6] Leviticus 19:2

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