

Balak

July 8, 2017

וַיָּגֵר מוֹאָב מִפְּנֵי הָעָם הַזֶּה מְאֹד כִּי רַב־הוּא וַיִּקְּץ מוֹאָב מִפְּנֵי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Numbers 22:3 *Moab became terribly afraid because the people were so numerous; Moab dreaded the Israelites*



In this portion, Balak, the King of Moab, calls on a seer named Bilaam to curse the children of Israel. The Torah tells us that the King's desire to destroy the Israelites is based on his fear that they are growing too numerous and their potential to rise up alarmed him. Indeed, the people of Moab "dreaded" the Israelites. This is not the first time this fear gripped a leader and nor would it be the last. Pharaoh and the Egyptians also "dreaded" the Israelites (Exodus 1:12).

Commentators explain that the word for dread - "*kotz*" - shares the same root as the word for thorn. Both the King of Moab and Pharaoh saw the Israelites as a potential

"thorn in their side," as though Israel's growth and prosperity posed a direct threat to the future of their people. Since Moab, others have shared this fear: Haman and the Hellenistic leaders, those who led the First and Second Crusades, the leaders of the Spanish Inquisition, and, in more recent history, the Nazis. Each aggressor acted out of the groundless fear that Jewish prosperity would result in their own decline.

To be sure, much energy could be spent lamenting the Jewish past and fretting over what and who will next be bent on destroying the Jewish people. Jewish education could focus on developing leaders and increasing funding to combat antisemitism. Leaders could face off with proponents of the BDS and SJP movements and those who delegitimize the State of Israel. But, while concern about the Jewish future and advocating for Israel's continual prosperity should be on the agenda of World Jewry and in the syllabus of every religious education program, careful consideration should be given to the extent of that focus and the methodology used when teaching about defending Jewish achievements and Israel's legitimacy.

Consider the story of Balak and Bilaam. The narrative detailing the possible destruction of the ancient Israelite people is told in a creative and somewhat comedic manner - featuring a talking donkey and a bumbling would-be seer who converses with G-d (presumably the same G-d of the Israelites). The outcome of Bilaam's efforts is magnificent. Not only does he bless rather than curse the Israelites, his blessing ends up in the canon of daily Jewish prayer.

So, what can we learn from this? For certain, Jews need to be alert to the dangers of those who would curse us and who are intent on our destruction. But this cannot be the sole or even a major focus of the lessons taught to children who spend two or, at best, three hours each week learning what it means to identify as a Jew and connect with Israel.

Serious attention ought to be given to programs and lessons that show diaspora Jewry's inextricable bond to the Land and State of Israel. This bond is a core component of Jewish identity - not because the country grabs daily headlines from the often negatively biased media, but rather because Israel has been a part of the story of Judaism for as long as the story itself. Furthermore, teaching the **context** of modern Israel, in addition to ancient biblical and liturgical ties, is crucial to understanding and advocating for Israel's continuity. Lessons should focus on the fact that Zionism is the outcome of the Jewish people taking control of their ongoing development and prosperity, not for the destruction of others, but for the ongoing "construction" of the Jewish people.

Somehow, as tiny as it is, Israel has captured the attention of the entire world. A mere speck on the physical map and with a fraction of the world's population, Israel has become front page material every single day - causing some to fear, as Balak did, that the success of Judaism in general and Israel in particular places the world in jeopardy.

Discussion Questions:

1. Building on the theme of an outsider offering a surprising "blessing," after seeing the Israelites "in action," an interesting parallel can be made to the 1947 UN partition discussions and an individual whose "blessing" helped create the State of Israel. Jorge García-Granados, Guatemala's UN ambassador and a member of UNSCOP, was part of the committee that would recommend the partition of Palestine into separate Arab and Jewish states. Although naturally inclined to oppose European colonialism as a result of Guatemala's history of suffering under Spanish rule, Granados found many parallels between his country and Palestine. Especially intrigued by *kibbutzim*, he wrote, "I was extremely interested in its sociological possibilities for Guatemala and similar countries." Supporting the partition plan and the creation of a Jewish state, Granados lobbied Latin American countries to vote 'yes.' He cast the first vote in favor of the creation of the State of Israel and Guatemala was one of the first nations to recognize the new Jewish State. In 1956, it became the first country to open an embassy in Jerusalem, with Granados as ambassador. There are streets in both Jerusalem and Ramat-Gan named in his honor. Consider why a man, after spending his youth in political exile from military dictatorships in his own country, might align himself with Jews in Palestine and their Zionist efforts?
2. Compare the following paragraph, written by Granados in his book, The Birth of Israel as a parallel to Bilaam's blessing of Ma Tovu, "How goodly are your tents..." in Numbers 24:5:
"In sharp contrast to the pioneer outposts of the Negev was Tel-Aviv, the metropolis of Palestine. When our long, twenty-six-car procession entered this city, we heard a distant thunder. It took some moments before we realized this was the cheering of huge masses greeting the first United Nations cars. We drove through beautiful avenues lined with modern four- and five-story apartment houses, built of concrete, painted in the soft, pleasant looking colors: pale yellow, pale green, pale pink. There were many balconies and women and girls waved at us from them. Crowds, which grew denser as we reached the center of the city, filled the sidewalks and they applauded incessantly as we moved by. It was an experience for me to see smiling Jewish traffic policemen wave us on, and Jewish newsboys racing beside our cars trying to catch a glimpse of us. The square in front of Tel-Aviv's Municipal Building was a solid mass of excited human beings; when our automobiles halted, men and women pressed against us so heavily it was almost impossible to push open our doors and slip out."
3. Who considers Israel to be a "thorn in their side" today? What is the context of that thorniness? Why do you think, as a significant minority, Israel continues to be considered a threat to others?
4. How is Israel taught in religious schools today? Should this focus shift and deepen? If so, in what ways?

Additional Resources:

Michael Herzog, [*The Phenomenon of Delegitimization in the Overall Context of Attitudes towards Israel and the Jewish People*](#), The Jewish People Policy Institute

American Zionist Movement - 2011 Conference: Video Presentation: [Hard Realities](#): Delegitimization of Israel