

פרשת בלק

OVERVIEW

Israel encamps opposite Moab. King Balak, alarmed by the proximity of an unknown force, sends for Balaam, the soothsayer, requesting him to pronounce a curse on the intruder and avert the danger of an attack. Balaam saddles his she-donkey in response to the royal summons. On the way the animal stops in its tracks, halted by an angel sent by G-d. It reacts to the master's furious blows by speaking to him in a human language.

Balaam arrives in Moab but his unable to act other than he is commanded by G-d. He bestows grand blessings upon the people which does not fear human might and lives in isolation protected by the divine Master. "How good are your tents, o Yaakov".

Israel remains in the Moab area for several months. The proximity has regrettable consequences in that the daughters of Moab seduce numerous Jewish men and persuade them to join in idol worship and lewd acts. The scandal comes to a head when Zimri, prince of Shimeon, brings a moabite woman to his tent in the heart of the Jewish encampment. At once Pinchas, Aharon's grandson, takes a spear in his hand, follows Zimri and the woman to the house and runs both of them through, the man of Israel and the woman from Moab. He avenges the honor of G-d and Israel by killing them both.

COMMENTARY

Israel and Moab

The first verses of Ch. 22 reflect the profound impact on the non-Jewish world of Israel's liberation from Egypt and the miraculous events at the sea of reeds and during the march through the desert. They describe the panic among the neighboring powerful states induced by the approach of the Jewish columns and the defeat of two mighty lands, Sichon and Og. Moab could expect the same fate. Strangely, no armed conflict ever took

place between Israel and Moab. This is the result of a policy (never to attack those who are not really motivated by hostile intentions. The Jewish people adhered strictly to the concept of a defensive war (with the exception of the conquest of Canaan whose borders had been circumscribed from the start and were strictly observed). Unlike Sichon and Og who met Israel with armed might, Moab's concern over an attack by Israel is unfounded, But its fear of an undefined threat from the east is very real and Balak resorts to unusual methods to deflect the danger. He summons the visionary Balaam to pronounce the curse over the invader.

Balaam

Our Sidrah brings us to the end of the forty-year period of deprivation in the desert. The harsh lessons learned during this ordeal provided the people with a physical and spiritual maturity that enabled them to take the place assigned to them by the divine plan. The destructive elements among the people having been eliminated, they had learned to put their full trust in G-d and to walk in the path charted for them by the divine Word. This is the background to the Torah's account of Balaam's failed mission when he uttered words of rare grandeur as he extolled Israel's genius and closeness to G-d.

Understanding Balaam's complex personality offers considerable difficulties. It is quite certain that he was not a friend of Israel. He is one of a group of outstanding men - among them Malkizedek, Job and Yithro who recognized and accepted the truth and existence of the One and Only G-d. In Balaam's case, this recognition does not go hand in hand with a commitment to the moral-ethical principles enunciated in G-d's Torah. Recognition of G-d without the purifying effect of G-d's law.

Thus it is little wonder that despite his insight into G-d's workings, Balaam freely practiced idol worship. He lacked the understanding for the Sinaitic appeal for man's

free-willed subordination to the dictates of the divine will. Balaam believes in G-d, But he is not a Jew.

שנאת חנם, groundless hatred, is Moab's real motivation governing its relationship with Israel. Nowhere do we find even a shred of aggressive intentions on the part of Israel against Moab and Midian. Yithro, priest of Midian, was received with all honors by Moshe, his son-in-law. But relations between the men are quickly poisoned when unscrupulous demagogues employ the weapons of fear and envy. Israel, G-d's ally, must be dealt with by using supernatural means. Balaam is steeped in the ancient culture of the Orient and was an expert of political prophecy.

The antique world, Greeks and Romans, and the oriental countries, firmly believed in the power of blessings and curses pronounced by "magicians" and Balaam was one of the most prominent ones. Be was known for his superior intelligence and the Talmud goes so far as to state that had he been born a Jew he would have been worthy to receive the Torah.

G-d appears to Balaam to instruct him regarding the approach he is to take in responding to the royal summons. From his response to the king transmitted through Balak's messenger, it is evident that he is ready to comply with the divine order. For his part Balak ascribes Balaam's initial refusal to pronounce the curse, to his dissatisfaction with the promised reward. Balak raises his financial offer and here again Balaam's complex character emerges as he inquires of G-d whether in view of the new conditions he could give in to the king's pressure. To our great surprise, this time Balaam obtains G-d's permission to go with the messengers, "however, the word that I will speak to you, that you must do". The Talmud comments on this surprising decision that a bold approach, even towards G-d, is sometimes successful: go, If you insist but be aware that you will hasten your own downfall.

Here we have the famous episode of the she-donkey who suddenly speaks to Balaam. She reproaches him and points to the angel blocking the road. Most commentators explain the miracle by emphasizing the lesson Balaam receives from the mouth of an animal that has more understanding of the divine intervention than man: the angel blocks the road, no one can pass. But Balaam is not aware of the obstacle. He needed the simple lesson taught by the animal: to obey G-d's command.

It is generally assumed that the animal actually spoke the words as they are recorded in the text. According to some commentators Balaam interpreted the donkey's cries of pain in the context of these verses. He was warned by the angel not to arouse G-d's anger. There is a certain irony in his furious reaction to the animal's reproach: "If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you on the spot". The Midrash has the she-donkey smile at the thought that Balaam would need a sword to kill a lowly animal believing at the same time that mere words could destroy an entire nation.

Balaam's origin lies in Abaraham's land, the cradle of monotheism which permanently changed the world and mankind. He is without a doubt one of the most authentic visionaries in history. He possessed the gift of prophecy to a degree that he could have become a second Moshe had he devoted his abundant talents to goals other than personal ambition, power and wealth. Moshe sacrificed his family life and reputation for the noble task of leading the people. An Isaiah and Jeremiah never ceased to warn of the sin's moral entanglement. But a Balaam never hesitates to employ the most despicable means to achieve his aims. He pronounces blessings but his purpose of coming is to deliver curses.

Balaam's pronouncements

"May the mouths of others sing your praise, but not yours". This utterance by our sages is applied to the prophecies pronounced by Balaam. Nowhere do we find more exquisite language in extolling the virtues of this unique people than in the words proclaimed by Balaam against his will. "How

could I curse where G-d has not cursed; how could I damn where G-d has not damned". This sets the tone for Israel's history. No plots against Israel were ever successful in the long run without G-d's explicit approval. The reverse is equally true: once G-d has decided on a specific course for Israel all preventive measures will fail as will all attempts of forming a common front against the nation of G-d.

"It is a people that dwells apart and does not reckon itself among the nations". Here is the fundamental explanation for Israel's survival and continued existence in the face of the most vicious persecutions and attempts of total annihilation. Israel must pursue its own, often lonely, march through history, on the path charted by G-d and His Torah, deaf to either criticism or approval by the nations of the world.

"There are no soothsayers in Yaakov, no magic in Israel; it is revealed to Yaakov and Israel at this time what G-d has wrought". Israel has no use for the advice of clairvoyants and the "enlightened" - it knows but one yardstick to guide its actions: the divine law as laid down in G-d's Torah.

Finally the magnificent conclusion: "How good are your tents, o Jacob, your habitations, o Israel". These deeply felt words fall from Salaam's unwilling lips as he beholds the purity of Israel's family life, the beauty of its tents, the unity among the brother tribes. The purity ensures the glorious ripening of the spiritual seed that enables Israel, despite its numerical inferiority, to prevail over all assaults on its physical stability and moral integrity.

"Those that bless you be blessed, and those that curse you are laden with the curse". Balaam's grandiose proclamation conveys his ecstatic reaction to the sight of the harmony and brotherhood in Israel's ranks. He envisions a future of Israel's triumphant victory as the defenders and champions of the divine ideals.

"May my death be like that of these righteous men". He paints an ideal picture of beauty and vigor, strangely contrasting, with the evidence of weakness that fill the previous chapters (from the evil reports of the spies to the fatal rebellion of Korach). Now the people have regained their inner strength.

The Daughters of Moab

Balak's and Balaam's attempts to subvert the people proves unavailing. Their only chance to sow the seeds of discord between G-d and His people is by seducing Israel to commit immoral acts causing G-d to turn away from it. Balaam enlists the services of the daughters of Moab who are the priestesses of the depraved baal-peor. These women lure numerous Israelites to join the orgies which are part of their cult. Needless to emphasize the potentially fatal consequences of such temptation nor are there enough words to praise the holy fury prompting Aharon's grandson to cut down the tribal prince who dishonored G-d and His people.

The evil consequences were deadly indeed. More than 24,000 youths in Israel lost their lives. At the last moment, Pinchas saved the honor of his people and restored inner peace among its ranks. The spiritual strength the people gained in the aftermath of the catastrophe enabled it to reach the borders of the promised land.

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