

Parshas Balak

This week's Parsha is Balak, which recounts the events of Balaam, whom Balak called to curse the Jews, but instead ended up giving blessings. One reason for this was Balaam's observation of "Mah Tov U Oha Lecha Yaakov", that the Jews were respectful of one another, and therefore warranted blessings instead of curses. Further, it says in the Posuk, 23:24, that the nation "rises like a lioness and leaps like a lion" about which Rashi says, the Jews wake up early to be quick to serve Hashem. (And it is also the name of the most recent successful mission by Israel against its adversary- Am Kilavee)¹. Once Balak realized he was out of options, he muddled the Oha Lecha Yakov (the tents) by introducing Znus into the nation, which resulted in an epidemic and idol worship (the Gemara in Sanhedrin 106a discusses this).

But there is a thread between the last few Parshas, as it relates to our time. We are a series of stories of wrongdoing, beginning with Shlach, where the Meraglim reported negatively about Israel. One of the things they said was that it was a land that eats its inhabitants. The Mefarshim explain this means it's at war. The allegory is interesting. The next Parsha is Korach, whose ideas and high horse pontifications resulted in his

getting swallowed, i.e. eaten by the land. Meaning, although the Meraglim's allegory was referencing something else, in Korach's case, it happened. This is because, even though war would more appropriately represent a land eating its inhabitants, that is something that is physical and can be stopped through negotiations. Whereas Korach, who was swallowed up, was more dangerous because he had a problematic ideology. Which is ever apparent today. Some aim to enact laws and ideas based on a Kum Ba Ya idea, which sounds good, but to enact it would be to enforce an idea that won't work. There are too many instances where laws and ideas that sound good are forced on people, and the result is often not what was intended—a land which eats itself. The neighbours turn on another, etc. (something we witnessed as recently as COVID, and now with socialist ideologies that will undoubtedly result in long-term problems). This is such a problem that the land eats its own. It is more problematic than war because it is ingrained in people's mindset, and requires a cataclysmic shift to be obliterated (think WW2), or Pharaoh turning the Egyptians against the Jews, or any other problem in history, especially as it relates to Jews. From Korach, Hashem reminds us in the Parsha, with Chukas, as we spoke last week, to maintain learning Torah as the protection and the guide for

¹ Ramban points out that this is a prophecy for when the Jews would rise against Midian and win. Which makes it all the more fitting name for the

Israel Mission against Iran and its ideological adversaries.

staying on the right path, and be protected because there will be those, like Balak, who wanted to stir the pot, causing enemies Moab and Midian to unite against the Jews, simply because of their reputation of being phenomenally successful (As explained by Rashi). What did Balak want? To curse the Jews and bring them down a few rungs, because the Jews' success was intolerable. But the person he hired to perform this ended up not being able to curse the Jews. Balaam, who was a sly character, and whose personality can be analyzed alone in the Torah, and applied to characters of our modern era, ended up looking at the Jews, and turned his curses into blessings. But Balak didn't learn his lesson; he heeded advice from Balaam to introduce promiscuity into the nation. He ended up ideologically attacking the Jews, through a 'harmless' introduction of linen sales with beautiful women, and he was partially successful. (Until Pinchas came and stopped things, and whose Parsha is filled with all the beacons of light Hashem gives us throughout the year, so we don't lose faith, and we remain connected). Why does Balak follow, because it isn't enough to follow the Torah (Chukas) to stave off the Korach's, and the Meraglim, we must realize that the Yetzer Hara (Balak) works in sly ways, and what you can think is of little or no consequence, can still be a threat. It reminds me of a story of an old Chassid in the shtetl who was having a smoke outside his house on a cold winter day. And his friend walked by and asked

what that was all about. The Chassid responded, "There was a lady in the house cleaning, and he didn't want to be left alone, as all men have a Yetzer Hara." The point being, one must build extra fences and not convince themselves they are "Ok" because they learn a lot. A Threat is a threat, and temptation is still a temptation. The Gemara in Avoda Zara explains that if a Jewish practice becomes used by non-Jews for Avoda Zara, can we practice it? The Halacha seems to say that we cannot then practice this, as it becomes a disgusting act in the eyes of Hashem. This means we must be careful not to act like the nations around us, even if it seems harmless, as the results can be catastrophic.

But all is not lost, and not to sound like Mussar. Because, in our time, the fact that we are still servants of Hashem, and learning Torah with fervour and anxiously doing all we can to bring Moshiach, as Rabbi Tarfon explained, if he were born in a later generation, he would be a Rasha. Meaning the fact that we are still servants of Hashem and following the Torah, notwithstanding all external temptations, is a Miracle, and this is why we will be Zocheh to welcome Mashiach.

Good Shabbos