**Parashat Balak: Reminding Us of Our Journey**

Rabbi Elisha Wolfin

Dear Friends,

Parashat Balak is very odd. An entire drama takes place in the palace of Balak, the king of Moav, and no one among Bnei Yisrael has any idea it is happening.

The sleepy Israelite camp has stopped at the foot of the mountains of Moav, on the Eastern side of the Jordan. They cannot imagine that the leaders of Moav and Midian are plotting to bring the legendary magician Bil'am all the way from today's Iraq to curse them. This is the only parasha in the Torah in which the reader is aware of the unfolding events, whereas the heroes of the story are not.

Does an event matter if we are unaware of it? We all have those who love us and those who hate us. I am not referring to those who are close to us, in which case their feelings are very relevant. I am referring to strangers, whose love or loathing is of no consequence. But if there is someone who wishes us evil behind our backs - even if we know his plot will always be thwarted – do we need to be aware of it?

On a personal and a national level, we are surrounded by people and organizations who hate us and would be very happy if we were harmed; if we were to disappear, all the better. But should we know about it?

If we do not need to know, why should we care what Balak the king of Moav thought about us, or what curse Bil'am the magician was planning? Why does the Torah insist on telling us the story? What is its value?

One possible answer – childish, innocent, and perhaps too sweet – is that the Torah wants to teach us that even when we are “asleep”, i.e. unaware, God protects us. Even when there are those who wish us harm, "the Keeper of Israel does not slumber."(Psalm 121) It's a lovely idea, but our bloody history has proven otherwise.

Another possibility - a somewhat paranoid one - is that the Torah wishes to warn us against our enemies wherever they are, so that we are always on guard. This answer, too, does not provide us with spiritual guidance and sustenance.

Could there be another reason to read Parashat Balak? Perhaps there is value and meaning to this unique "behind the scenes" glimpse of the mysterious ways of the world.

Our Sages tend to compare Bil'am and Moshe, two of the greatest prophets ever to serve their people, both of whom spoke with and on behalf of God. While Moshe spoke to the Creator "face-to-face", and Bil'am only spoke to God in his dreams (and even his donkey was able to see things that he could not), still, they were colleagues on two sides of a spiritual fence.

I would like to suggest that Bil'am would be better compared to Avraham! It is even possible that their forefathers knew each other, since both came from the same area- Iraq of today. Both of them had an intimate relationship with God, both were attuned to Him and to His instructions. Most importantly, they both dealt with blessings.

This is where the similarity ends and the differences begin. Bil'am was recruited in order to curse. He was offered money and great honor to do so. He did not consider the request in any way flawed. True, he consulted God in a dream, and God told him not to accept the offer under any circumstances. But when an even more tempting offer was made, he checked again, in case God had changed His mind, and God does, in fact, allow him to go, with the caveat that he say only what God puts in his mouth. Bil'am is a magician for hire, there to fulfill requests in exchange for payment.

Avraham, on the other hand, had only one mission – to bless! Avraham never used his "Divine connections" to curse. This may actually be the reason that God took him out of his homeland, because it was a place where magicians were for hire, whereas his task was to "be a blessing."

In Jewish texts, Bil'am is referred to as "Bil'am the wicked", even though he ended up showering Am Yisrael with blessings more beautiful than any heard before or since. He is called thus because his intentions were evil, and for this purpose he was hired for his task.

In this way, the Torah is showing us what is expected of anyone capable of doing so: to be a blessing. God blessed Creation and said it is "Good" and even "Very good"; now you, too, should do your part.

This is not a small expectation! Notice how often we are confronted – from within or from our surroundings – with less worthy, uncharitable thoughts that are more similar to Bil'am's than to Avraham's. To bless and to be a force for good takes effort, spiritual effort.

This is why we read Parashat Balak: to remind us of Avraham's spiritual journey- which was a worthy one - and to help us be worthy of being his followers.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha