

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

בס"ד

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רפאל חיים דוב בן ריסה שושנה.

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Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS BALAK

Master Manipulator

Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Yisroel had done to the Emori. Moav was very frightened of the people because they were many, and Moav was disgusted in the face of B'nei Yisroel (22:2-3).

This week's *parsha* opens with a remarkable statement: Balak took notice of what B'nei Yisroel had done to the great kings of the time – Sichon and Og. This seems peculiar as Sichon and Og were the two great world power leaders of that time; their defeat at the hands of this upstart nation had to have attracted worldwide notice. What was it that Balak “saw” that had escaped everyone else’s attention?

Even more perplexing, if the nation of Moav was frightened by the death and destruction that B'nei Yisroel had wrought upon the Emori, logically Moav should be frightened of their incredible power – so why does the Torah say that they were frightened by the numbers of the Jewish nation? Additionally, what does the statement “Moav was disgusted in the face of B'nei Yisroel” add to the narrative?

What Balak saw was an opportunity to create a leadership role for himself. In reality, there wasn't any reason for Moav to be afraid. After all, B'nei Yisroel had purposefully avoided conflict with the nation of Edom because they were cousins (descendants of Eisav – Yaakov's brother). Both Moav and Midian were cousins as well; Moavites were descendants of Lot (Sarah's brother) and those of Midian were the children of Avraham (by second wife Keturah). Because of these connections, B'nei

Yisroel had no interest in a war with them.

But Balak's genius was in the creation of a fabricated animosity. He pointed out that the Jewish nation was exceedingly great in number and would undoubtedly want to settle in the vicinity. He may have even known that the great multitude of Erev Rav wouldn't have a portion in the land of Israel or that some of the tribes wished to settle on Moav's side of the Jordan.

What was it that Balak “saw” that had escaped everyone else's attention?

Thus, Balak singlehandedly created the first immigrant and refugee crisis. This was the disgust that Moav felt; they were disgusted with the prospect of having to live and share land with a nation that would totally devour all the natural resources. This is why Bnei Yisroel are described as *“this nation [that] will chew up our entire surroundings as an ox chews up grass of the field”* (22:4).

Balak also highlighted the futility of trying to defeat B'nei Yisroel through a conventional war. In this manner, he created a desperate situation that seemingly had no solution. But of course Balak had a plan all along. After scaring Moav into looking to their perennial enemy (Midian – home country of



Moshe Rabbeinu) for advice, Midian responded that the only solution was to find someone who had the power to get Hashem to act.

Balaam was the equivalent of Moshe Rabbeinu in prophecy. As Rashi notes (22:5), Balak and Balaam were from the same place and had known each other years earlier (Balaam had, in fact, prophesied that Balak would become a king someday). Therefore, Balak held the power to bring about the solution to this seemingly impossible situation. In effect, he created the mirage of a problem and then positioned himself to be the only path to a solution. That is why the Torah says, “Balak son of Zippor was king of Moav at that time” (22:4) - Rashi points out that he was appointed King to deal with this emergency situation. What Balak saw that no one else saw was an opportunity to get himself appointed as king.

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And Loyalty Above All...

The officers of Moav came to Balak and reported that “Balaam refuses to return with us.” Balak continued (to try and recruit Balaam) by sending more officers of a higher rank than those previously. They came to Balaam and said “so said Balak – do not refrain from coming to me for I will honor you very much...” Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak... (22:14-18)

Rashi (22:13) points out that Balaam had given Balak’s first emissaries the message that they were not important enough to request his presence at Balak’s behest. Balak, who was very keen on having Balaam come and curse B’nei Yisroel, therefore sent messengers that were of higher ranking than the first group.

Many Rishonim (Rosh, Rabbeinu Bachaye) question the Torah’s description of the higher ranking officers as “the servants of Balak.” Calling these high ranking officers “servants” seems to imply that they were of a very lowly stature. How does this fit in with the narrative that Balak actually sent higher ranking officers?

Balak, as we have seen, was a very astute political leader who certainly understood the tenets of building an effective hierarchy of command. Obviously, in order to be promoted to a position of responsibility one must be capable; but among those who are capable of doing the job how does a leader decide who is of a higher and who is of a lesser rank?

The answer is loyalty. Those who are most trusted and loyal are the ones who are brought closest to the king. The term “*eved* – servant” doesn’t always refer to one of lowly stature; often it implies the relationship between the master and the servant. The Gemara has the maxim “the hand of the servant is as the hand of the master.” In other words, the servant is an

extension of the master. In such a situation only the closest and most trusted confidant is placed into that position.

This was the position of both Moshe who is called “*eved Hashem*,” and Eliezer who is called “*eved Avraham*.” In both of those instances, the term *eved* doesn’t mean a lowly servant. Quite the opposite – both of them acted in lieu of their master, in modern parlance it would be akin to a “power of attorney.”

By calling the second group “the servants of Balak,” Balaam was actually recognizing their unique position as trusted confidantes of Balak, and worthy of his consideration to null Balak’s offer to come and curse the Jewish people.

For the Love of Money

“Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak, ‘If Balak gives me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot transgress the word of Hashem, my G-d, to do anything small or great’” (Bamidbar 22:18).

Rashi comments that this *pasuk* reflects negatively on Balaam’s character, indicating that he was plagued by a desire for other people’s money. By speaking of the possibility that Balak would give him so much wealth, Balaam indicated that he coveted Balak’s assets, which the Torah views as a fundamental character flaw.

This desire for wealth is generally treated as a negative desire. Yet, we find similar statements made by great figures in Jewish history, and their expression of this sentiment is actually to their credit. Dovid Hamelech, for instance, declares in *Sefer Tehillim*, “The Torah of Your Mouth is better for me than thousands of gold and silver” (119:72). If desiring thousands of gold and silver was an abominable character trait he wouldn’t be saying much about the value of the Torah. Similarly, the Tanna Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma relates in *Pirkei Avos* (6:9) that he told someone, “Even if you give me all the gold, silver, precious stones, and pearls in the world, I would live only in a place of Torah.”

The statements of these great men are certainly not viewed as indicative of a shameful lust for wealth; on the contrary, both Dovid Hamelech and Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma appreciated the value of money, but they considered Torah far more important and precious. That being the case, why is Balaam’s statement viewed as painting a negative picture of his personality?

There is one significant difference between the words of Balaam and the statements of Dovid Hamelech and Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma: Rashi notes specifically that Balaam desired the money of others while both Dovid Hamelech and Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma speak of its value in general terms. Balaam’s character flaw lay in his desire to take the money of others, not in his appreciation of its inherent value.

It is not a shortcoming for a person to understand and appreciate the value of money. Many wonderful things can be accomplished with money; when used properly it is a vehicle for accomplishing much of what Hashem desires for our world

– it is certainly needed to open Torah institutions and *chessed* organizations throughout the world.

Thus, Dovid Hamelech and Rabbi Yosi ben Kisma are applauded for their statements. Balaam’s flaw, meanwhile, lay in his desire for other people’s wealth. If we just read his words literally we can see that he didn’t just want wealth; he wanted Balak’s house full of silver and gold.

The tenth of the *Aseres Hadibros* is the prohibition against coveting another person’s belongings, which many Rishonim view as the most severe of the Ten Commandments. There is nothing wrong with having a desire for a beautiful home or for other assets, for if these things are used properly, they can make a positive impact. However, it is terribly improper to harbor a desire to take things for oneself that belong to someone else. Coveting another person’s belongings is where the sin begins, and that is the terrible character trait that Balaam exhibited.



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