

TIMELESS TORAH

BALAK - A Nation That Rises Like a Lion: Understanding Bilaam's Blessings

The Hidden Hand of History

Parshat Balak is unique among all the parshiyot of the Torah in that it is written entirely from the viewpoint of outside observers. Indeed, as the Chatam Sofer (d. Pressburg 1839) pointed out in the final responsum printed in his halachic work on Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah, there were no Jewish eyewitnesses at all for the events of this parshah, and even one who firmly believes in the rest of the Torah might be tempted to harbour doubts about what happened in Parshat Balak. Nevertheless, asserts the Chatam Sofer, this episode forms an integral part of the Torah and is no different to any other passage; one who denies the truth of Parshat Balak is equivalent to one who denies any other part of the Torah. In the same way, the Chatam Sofer concludes, the brief mention of the Final Redemption at the end of the Book of Devarim, although it obviously has not yet been witnessed by anyone, is also a fundamental part of our belief system.

With these few words, the Chatam Sofer portrays this parshah as a glimpse into an accurate perspective on Jewish history. Behind the scenes of every episode that we experience lies the hidden hand of Hashem, Who, in His infinite love for His nation, guides and cares for us at every moment. In fact, the Torah itself, in Parshat Ki Tetzei, summarises the entire episode of Bilaam as follows: 'And Hashem turned the curses into blessings because Hashem, your God, loves you' (Devarim 23:6).

Rav Hirsch (d.1888) explains one of the verses in this parshah in a similar vein. 'From

the heights of the rocks I see it and from the high places I observe it' (23:9). According to Rav Hirsch, this is a commentary on the wide scope of history. Just as a distant view surveyed from an elevated vantage point seems closer than when seen from lower down, so do events through history appear more closely connected when looked at with a far-reaching perspective. When we live in the moment, we see only a small snapshot, but in the framework of the development of the whole of time, we are able to appreciate the centuries woven into a single tapestry.

A Nation With a Mission

One of the best-known phrases from Parshat Balak is Bilaam's description of the Jewish nation as an '*am levadad yishkon* — a nation that dwells alone' (23:9). Although the word *am* normally has a negative connotation, it is used here as a praise for the Jewish people. According to Rav Hirsch, while a goy is a nation that seeks to impress its greatness by power and might, the word *am* refers to a community which pursues its own internal mission without being unduly influenced by those of other nations.

Following in the same vein, the Netziv (d.1893) also sees this verse as exhorting the Jewish people to focus on their own values rather than imitate the hollow tenets of their neighbours. Throughout history, the trend of an exiled nation is to gradually integrate into the society to which they have been exiled until they eventually lose their identity altogether. The Jewish nation, however, is different. When they are proud of their identity, they dwell in tranquillity and honour; a people who are confident of



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

Wednesdays - 8.00-8.45pm | In-person at Kinloss

their position has no need to compete with others and others will not compete with them.

Another positive use of the word *am* is found in the phrase '*hen am kelavi yakum* — behold the nation rises like a lioness' (23:24). In this phrase, the commentators explain, the Jewish people are described as mighty warriors rising up against the kings of Canaan — '*lo yishkav ad yochal teref*— they will not dwell in their land until they have vanquished their adversaries'. Rashi, however, offers a radically different explanation. The Jewish people, he writes, rise like a lion in the morning to put on their Tefillin and daven Shacharit, *lo yishkav* — and they do not lie down at night — before driving away negative forces and depositing their souls with Hashem by reciting the Shema at bedtime.

This dichotomy of interpretations can actually be understood to be complementary. While bravery and might are necessary when wars have to be fought, of equal importance is what one goes to war with. The Jewish people fight with strength and with dedication, but more fundamentally, we fight with faith in Hashem and with our prayers.

Eternal Exodus

The Moabite king, Balak, in his initial message to Bilaam, expressed his concern about the 'nation that has left Egypt' (22:5). Bilaam, in his blessings, repeats the fact that this nation had recently left Egypt but he refers to the Exodus with two subtle differences. In verse 22, Bilaam proclaims '

'Kel motziam miMitzraim — God takes them out from Egypt', not only using the present tense, as opposed to Balak's past tense, but also attributing the Exodus to Hashem.

Rabbi Yissochor Dov Rokeach (b.1948), the current Belzer Rebbe, expounds on this idea, suggesting that Balak deliberately used the past tense to hint that although they may have left Mitzrayim on certain merits, they were no longer worthy of Divine protection. Bilaam, on the other hand, did not agree. The Exodus actually happened 190 years ahead of schedule, before the Jewish people would have become lost among the Egyptians. Bilaam's use of the present tense indicated that Hashem would always redeem them, regardless of their merits.

Thus, looking at Jewish history from a global perspective, these verses teach us that the Exodus was not a one-time event but a paradigm of Hashem's relationship with us. It happened in the past, at precisely the time that Hashem saw fit, and Hashem is still 'taking us out', saving us and protecting us until the time comes for the Final Redemption. As Jews, we live our lives with an awareness of the Exodus, mentioning it twice a day in our prayers and commemorating it in many of our mitzvot. With the message of the Exodus constantly with us, we realise that our past is not only our present, but our future as well.

Next Week: Pinchas - The Covenant & Promise of Peace