



Parshas Balak 2021, strength through unity

This week's Parsha Perspective is in memory of, Shlomo Ben Edward, Edward Ben Efraim & my grandfather, Rav Yeudah Ben Aaron. May their souls be uplifted and their memories a blessing.

This week's Parsha Perspective is in the merit of Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh, Rav Chaim Ibn Attar, one of the commentaries I use frequently. Because his Yahrzeit (anniversary of his passing) is on the 15th of Tammuz. He was a great Kabbalist and a giant Torah scholar, and both of these unique attributes are reflected in his commentary, the Ohr Hachaim. He is one of the few people with "Hakadosh-the holy" at the end of his name.

He passed away in Yerushalayim during Shabbos in 1743, less than a year after arriving in Israel. The story is told that on the same date, the Baal Shem Tov (the founder of the Chassidic movement) was sitting with his students at the last meal of Shabbos. When he suddenly exclaimed, "The light from the west has been extinguished! The holy Reb Pinchas of Koretz said, "The Sefer Ohr Hachaim protects the home, and learning it has the same effect on the soul as learning the Zohar." In his honor, may we merit the coming of Moshiach and the ultimate redemption.

Our Parsha tells us the story of Balak and Balaam. Balak, the king of Moav, worried about his upcoming battle with the Jewish people. Moshe and the Jewish nation had just won their wars with the powerful countries of Emor and Bashon. So Balak recruited Balaam, the famous non-Jewish prophet, to curse the Jewish people and hopefully defeat the Jewish nation in battle.

When Balaam was told of Balak's request, G-d appeared to him and said that he is not allowed to curse the Jewish people, for they are blessed. Balaam sent word back to Balak that G-d does not let him curse the Jewish people.

In response, Balak sent prestigious messengers back to Balaam, promising him great riches in return for his services. Once again, G-d appears to Balaam, but he allows him to go, provided that Balaam only says the words that G-d tells him to.

At the beginning of Balaam's trip, G-d placed an angel with a giant sword in his path. The donkey saw the angel and did not want to move; however, Balaam, who was oblivious to the angel, started to hit his donkey.

The Pasuk tells us (22:28) that the donkey turned to Balaam and said to him, *“what have I done to you that you hit three times?”* At that point, G-d revealed the angel to Balaam, who bowed down before the angel asking for forgiveness. The angel told him to continue on his journey but reminded him that he must only say what G-d tells him.

When Balaam arrived in Moav, he instructed Balak to build seven altars and offer sacrifices to G-d. However, instead of cursing the Jewish people, Balaam showered them with blessings. When Balak got angry that Balaam blessed the Jews, Balaam reminded him that he could only say what G-d tells him.

So Balak takes Balaam to another location, hoping that Balaam can curse the Jews from there. They build more altars and offer sacrifices, and again, G-d tells him a blessing for the Jewish people, which he repeats. The entire process repeats itself a third time, yet only blessings came out of Balaam's mouth. At this point, Balak despaired of accomplishing his goal and sent Balaam on his way.

However, a question comes to mind: When Balaam abandoned his hopes of cursing the Jewish nation, the Pasuk writes (24:1) *“that he saw it was good in the eyes of G-d to bless the Jewish people, so he turned his face to the desert.”* But where was Balaam facing before that now he turned to the desert? Furthermore, why does the Torah need to tell us which direction Balaam facing at all?!

The Rabbeinu Bachya (*Rav Bachya ben Asher, a Spanish commentary*) gives a simple answer. He explains that the Jewish people were in the desert right next to Moav; consequently, King Balak was afraid of being defeated and overthrown.

From the time Balaam came to Moav, he was not specifically next to the Jewish camp. Since Balak took him to a mountain where he could only partially see the Jewish people.

But when he wanted to bless the Jewish nation, he went down to face their camp to focus and concentrate specifically on them. He wanted to make sure that the blessings he was about to give would take full effect and impact the entire Jewish people.

However, the Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh gives a deeper and more profound explanation. He writes that Balaam was still trying to curse the Jewish people. He learns this from the fact that Pasuk (24:1) specifically tells us *“that it did not go like previous times when he searched for bad omens.”* Meaning, that Balaam’s blessings were not for lack of trying to curse them; in fact, this is the reason he turned to the desert.

The Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh explains that Balaam suddenly turned to the desert to arouse G-d’s anger against the Jewish people. Since the Golden Calf, the gravest sin that the Jewish nation ever did was done in the desert. Balaam looked to the desert to remind G-d of the nation’s betrayal and unworthiness for His blessings.

He adds that based on the Zohar, the desert is described as the home of the angel of death. So Balaam turned and looked toward there to provoke and prompt that angel to do his job C"V.

But the Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh on the next Pasuk explains that what Balaam saw when he looked toward the desert at the camp was Jewish unity. He saw that their tents were arranged and set up in a manner that each tent had privacy.

Balaam realized that there was respect, peace, and harmony amongst the Jewish nation. As the Pasuk writes (24:3), *“As Balaam looked up and he saw that Jewish people encamped tribe by tribe, the spirit of G-d came upon him.”*

The lesson the Ohr Hachaim learns from here is extremely powerful. When there is unity between the Jewish people, nothing can anger G-d. Not even the worst sin that the Jewish people ever committed, the sin of the golden calf. When we are united and act as a cohesive nation, the blessings of G-d flow freely amongst us.

In our daily life, we must understand that generally, it is only in times of disasters and tragedies that unites and unifies our nation. However, the blessings that we receive through being united in a peaceful period are much greater than what we obtain during a difficult time.

Therefore, we must go out of our way to look for methods to assist and help those that need it. But most importantly, engage, converse and approach people whom you disagree with and let them know you care about them, for they complete your nation.

“When there is no enemy within, the enemies outside can do no harm.”

—Sir Winston Churchill

*Have a meaningful Shabbos,
Rabbi Sholom Yemini*