

Parashat Balak, 5776, 2016:

The Prophets of Israel and the Nations

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Leah bat Shifra and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

According to the first *Midrash Rabbah* passage on our *parasha*, Hashem gave all the nations of the world the same opportunities and potential for leadership. This is based upon the notion that G-d's actions are perfect and His path is just. As such, Hashem provided for the possibility of perfect balance and equality in the world:

“The deeds of the [Mighty] Rock are perfect, for all His ways are just; a faithful G-d, without injustice He is righteous and upright.” (*Sefer Devarim* 32:4) [This may be interpreted as meaning] Hashem did not leave an opening in the World to Come (*l'atid lavo*) for the idol worshipping nations of the world to bring charges that He had denied them parity with the Jewish people. What did the Holy One blessed be He do to ensure this equality? Just as he provided the Jewish people with kings, wise men and prophets, so, too, did He do so for the idol worshipping nations of the world. (*Midrash Rabbah* 20:1, this and all translations, brackets and underlining my own, all Torah translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The Midrash continues and notes that just as Hashem gave King Solomon to the Jewish people, he gave Nebuchadnezzar to the nations of the world; the former created the first *Beit HaMikdash* (Holy Temple), whereas the latter destroyed it. Moreover, G-d gave the wise King David great wealth which he used to purchase a House for Him, whereas, when Haman was given a similar fortune, he used it in an attempt to exterminate our nation. Most germane to our *parasha*, the Creator of the Universe gave Moshe to *klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people), and Bilam to the idol worshipping nations of the world.

Therefore, the Midrash teaches us, “All of the greatness bestowed upon the Jewish people was given in kind to the nations of the world.”

At this juncture, the Midrash compares and contrasts the Jewish prophets to their non-Jewish counterparts with regards to their actions and behaviors:

See the differences between the prophets of the Jewish people and the prophets of the idol worshippers: The prophets of Israel warned the Jewish people to refrain from engaging in Torah prohibitions. As it is stated, “Now you, son of man, I have made you a lookout for the house of Israel, and you will hear a word from My mouth, and you shall warn them from Me.” (*Sefer Yechezkel* 33:7) Yet, the [ultimate] prophet who arose from the non-Jews incited promiscuous behaviors [amongst the Jewish people] so that [G-d’s] creations would be destroyed from the world. Moreover, all of the [Jewish] prophets acted with the quality of mercy regarding both the Jewish and the idol-worshipping nations. As a result, Yermiyahu said, “Therefore, my heart shall stir for Moab like flutes, and my heart shall stir for the men of Kir-heres like flutes; because they dealt haughtily.” (*Sefer Yermiyahu* 48:36) And so, too, did Yechezkel say: “Now you, son of man, lift up a lament about Tyre.” (*Sefer Yechezkel* 27:2) [Yet,] this hard-hearted individual [Bilam] arose and attempted to destroy an entire nation without cause and without reason.

The final chapter of our *parasha* depicts the licentious acts committed by many of the men of the Generation of the Desert with the daughters of Moab. It is crucial to note that this did not “just happen.” Instead, *Chazal* (our Sages may their memory be blessed) teach us that these behaviors, and their accompanying idol worship, were meticulously planned and orchestrated by Bilam the sorcerer, to be implemented by Balak the king of Moab:

He [Bilam] said to him [Balak, the king of Moab]: “The G-d of these [the Jews] hates profligate and hedonistic behavior. In addition, they have a great desire for linen garments. Come and I will give you advice [as to how to defeat them]. Raise up tents for them enclosed by hangings in which you will place prostitutes, old women without and young women within, to sell them linen garments.” So he [Balak] pitched curtained tents from the snowy mountain [Hermon] as far as Beth ha-Yeshimot [i.e., right from north to south], and placed prostitutes in them — old women without, young women within. And when a Jewish [male] ate, drank, and was joyful, and went for a stroll in the market place, the old woman would say to him, “Do you not desire linen garments?” The old woman offered it at its current value, but the young one for less. This happened two or three times. After that she [the young one] would say to him, “You are now like one of the family, sit down and choose what you like. Gourds of Ammonite wine lay near her, and at that time non-Jewish wine was not yet prohibited. She would then say, “Would you

like to drink a cup of wine?” Once he would drink the wine, [and became inebriated – Rashi] his passion would be ignited and he would declare to her, “Listen to me [regarding my request for carnal relations – Rashi]! At that moment, she took out an idol from beneath her clothing and said to him, “Worship this!” “But I am a Jew!” he protested. “Why should this [act] mean anything to you?” she rejoined, “The only thing you have to do is defecate before it!” The Jew, however, had no idea that this was its peculiar form of worship [and, therefore, fulfilled her request in order for her to submit to him.] (*Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 106a*, translation, *The Soncino Talmud*, with my extensive emendations and brackets.)

Our Sages teach us: “There never arose in Israel a prophet like Moshe, but among the nations of the world there did arise; and who is that? Bilam son of Beor” (*Midrash Tanaim, Devarim: 34*). Bilam’s story, therefore, emerges as one of the greatest examples in history of purposely-squandered potential: Instead of using his prodigious prophetic talents to serve G-d and mankind, Bilam directed his efforts toward the eradication of our people and destruction of all that was good and holy. In short, in his prophecy-for-profit campaign, nothing was more valuable than self-aggrandizement.

We have been truly blessed with prophets of truth. May Hashem continue His beneficence by bringing *Mashiach Tzidkanu* (our Righteous Messiah) to lead our nation and rebuild the *Beit HaMikdash*, so that His Divine Presence will be manifest amongst us once again. May this take place soon and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.