

## Turning Curses into Blessings

Parashat Balak: Numbers 22:2–25:9 <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>Haftarah: Micah 5:6–6:8

By Rabbi Moshe Raphael Halfon

*"Now Balaam, seeing that it pleased the Eternal to bless Israel, did not, as on previous occasions, go in search of omens, but turned his face toward the wilderness. As Balaam looked up and saw Israel encamped tribe by tribe, the spirit of God came upon him. Taking up his theme, he said: ' . . . How fair are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel!'" (Numbers 24:1–3, 5)*

*"With what shall I approach the Eternal, do homage to God on high?.... Would the Eternal be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil?" .... "It has been told you, O mortal, what is good, and what the Eternal requires of you—Only to do justly, and love mercy, and walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:6-7,8).*

There are many worthy ways to look at this strange, wacky, and mythic tale of a frustrated king, a seer-for-pay, a donkey who makes an ass of the prophet, and curses which become blessings. Whether we view it is a parable, a “true” story, or wishful thinking about how Israel wanted to be seen by the ancient world, this parasha presents two fundamental questions: how do others see us, and how do we see ourselves? Why do others need to curse the Jews, and why at other times do they regard us with such admiration? Oy, who wants to have such blessings?

Each morning upon entering into prayer we bless ourselves with the very words of Balaam the seer: *“Ma Tov”* – *how good* it is to dwell in our people’s tent. These words are powerful: one is saying, without hubrus, “I am glad to be a member of this tribe. I feel a sense of belonging and self-worth.”

Over the years in my various leadership positions in the Jewish community, many people have told me either their positive or negative impressions about Jews – and many Jews also feel compelled to share their feelings about the Jewish community, their families, and their sense of themselves. All too often, both group’s opinions depend upon Israel’s latest action or crisis, or last week’s hot news. And yet beyond these momentary concerns

lies a deeper truth, a core message that I strive to teach and embody in my rabbinate: people who strive toward ethical behavior and spiritual integrity can and will often attract blessings and repel curses. (Not always in material ways). Attraction is more powerful than promotion. Potential converts to Judaism and born Jews alike often tell me that despite all of its challenges, *Yiddishkeit* offers them a living ethical code, and a way to “bless” even those events that seek to “curse” them.

An oft-cited midrash (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra 60a) suggests that Balaam was literally praising the “tents of Jacob” for being arranged to respect privacy and modesty, so that one family could not see inside the tents of others. I would be a rich rabbi if I had collected a shekel for every time I have given a sermon about the evils of *lashon hara* (gossip) or *sinat hinam* (personal enmity), only to hear someone after services say “that was a great sermon” and then as they’re leaving the synagogue they comment to a friend something like “...”did you hear what \_\_\_ did?” If gossip can cause problems in social or organizational occasions, it can be downright dangerous in the press, politics or in world affairs! Some news outlets and devious leaders have perfected the art of spreading lies through social media, sometimes with fatal results. We Jews must strive to avoid *lashon harah*, to internalize ethical behavior through *Mussar* and weekly Torah study, and to be models of holy people, even as we also try to thrive as a minority in a very diverse society. We should strive toward ethical behaviors, while also have fun being Jewish. Where curses abide, we should try to make blessings. Balaam’s blessings upon the Israelites were so powerful because he was observing them as a seer from the outside. This parsha shows the importance of how others see us.

On a deeper level, a Hasidic interpretation teaches that the two halves of the sentence “Your tents O Jacob” alludes to the outer appearance – material blessings perhaps - while “Your dwelling places O Israel”—refers to the higher nature or “soul” of the people. A people who live by core ethical truths can accrue blessings of the spirit that go far beyond blessings of material wealth.

As a companion to this parsha, our Rabbis wisely chose the *haftarah* from Micah, not only because it mentions Balaam, but to make a more important statement. Micah turns the story of this “prophet-for-pay” on its head, and transcends the simple questions of blessings and curses. A true prophet doesn’t just curse or bless, predict or warn. A true prophet presents eternal ethical principles for living a fulfilling life in harmony with universal

principles. Micah exhorts the people to move beyond sacrifices, rituals and magic, and instead to live by the simple ethical prescription: "to do justly, and love mercy, and walk humbly with your God". Micah uses the memory of Balak and his "hired gun" Balaam to berate the people of Israel for relying on military machinery and false prophets, rather than hearing true prophecy. The message is clear: God may have a special relationship with the Jews, but they must always remember to behave in a manner worthy of Divine blessing.

So it is with our wars and ecological crises as well. Donkeys and other animals see things about which people, corporations and governments choose to be blind, and speak in languages humans must hear and heed. As the seas burn, and oil gushes forth from the ocean floor, the creatures of the earth, oceans and skies are crying out to us like Balaam's donkey to uncover our eyes, open our ears, and "do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God."