

Rabbi's Column

There are four main protagonists in this week's Torah portion, with two quite prominent individuals in guest-starring roles. (At least throughout most of the portion. Towards the end, things get a bit sloppier - but I am not referring to the epilogue this week.) The main characters are Balak, after whom the portion is named; Balaam, God and Israel. I consider Israel to be a main character, as this militarily successful group drives the plot and functions as a visual center., even if they have no direct lines of their own.

I can easily understand Balak's animosity towards the Israelites. Here were these long lost relatives, (whom he had been hoping would remain long lost) traipsing in his back yard, overturning the local structures. Why, they even got rid of those pesky Emorites, who had stolen land from the Moabites - now what would the rest of the world say about Moabite competence?

What does Balaam have against the Israelites? We find that he instigates the action at the end of the portion (where the temptresses do their thing quite well - and who are they? Moabite women!), and so winds up being a definite casualty of the wilderness experience. Moses makes sure of it, before he is all through.

Balaam is a miracle worker who is in communication with God. When he says and does what God has indicated is proper, it happens. He has earned a reputation for it. So far, none of the things he has wanted have been the opposite of what God intended, so he might be justified in thinking that God succumbs to magical influences like all other gods, with the caveat that whatever God wants, happens, and whatever the gods want only happens if no other god is strong enough to keep it from happening.

If Pharaoh's plan for the Israelites can be considered a precursor to some forms of anti-semitism (the kind that holds there is a good reason for what is done, and even when it backfires, the original reason seems to remain), the episode with Balaam appears to be the precursor to that kind of anti-semitism which remains a person's driving motivation even when confronted with facts to the contrary. Balaam may have felt it was perfectly logical that since the current group of Israelites were nothing like Abraham in terms of sophistication, etc., they were not really worth God's time or attention, and the more Balaam could help nature take its course, the better off the planet would be. When God tells Balaam that the people are valuable as is, he doesn't really believe it. Even after he utters his prophetic statements, he doesn't believe God really means it. Even if God means that a people who appear a certain way are sacrosanct, when Balaam shows God how their facade is a lie, God will relent and realize Balaam was correct in the first place, and God will destroy them completely.

What is Balaam's message, the one he so strongly wants to deny?

The people are not under the same rules as the rest of the nations. They have a different historical arc which they are following. The effects of their existence are beyond boycotting. They will find deplorable the things we would accept, since they know that despite all wishful thinking, God is in charge. Their best actions serve to be fiercely protective, while leaving alone those who do not bother them. When their home life is as it should be, all desire it. As the nations desire to do to Israel, such is what is done to them.

I think Balaam feels this whole situation is patently unfair. Why should there be a people against whom his words will not work? Why should there be a people who will encourage future generations to strive towards greatness? Isn't it enough to have leaders who can tell you how to be great?

I don't completely understand Balaam.

I also don't completely understand anti-semitism. I know it exists, but I don't understand exactly why it continues to do so, even in areas where there are no Jews. Perhaps if everybody tried to live up to Balaam's prophecy as if it applied to themselves, the whole world might be a better place.