

Rabbi's Column

In this week's Torah portion, Balak ben Tzipor (Destruction son of Bird) comes up with a plan to protect the Moabites from being destroyed by the Israelite community, since the Israelites had recently demolished the Emorite Army of Sichon. All of the Moabites were frightened (since they had forgotten their ancestry, I guess). Balak then becomes their King, which gives him the capacity to hire Balaam to curse the Israelites. God doesn't let him go through with actually cursing the Israelites, although God lets him go through the motions.

There are a lot of lessons to be learned from the portion. This time I would like to imagine what a current Balaam might say if asked to curse the Jews using his own words. [It is easy enough to find texts that say bad things about Jewish people - some of it written by Jews - but Balaam has some integrity and would need to do his own research.]

His first statement might be:

I have looked throughout history to find what will accomplish your goals. You want them to be cursed, yet cursing seems ineffective for the people as a whole. As a people, they have continued to exist where other nations have vanished. Indeed, some of the historical rules we apply everywhere else seem not to apply to them - from the viewpoint of history the best option seems to be to bless those who already seem blessed.

Naturally this will not go over well.

So our modern day Balaam will be directed to focus on a single part of history, to find something worthy of causing them to be appropriately cursed.

His second statement might be:

So I looked for a moment of history when the story is simply one of despair and despite, finding something to base a curse upon. What I found upon deep searching was that every time I thought I had found the moment, the action that declared them anathema, I found propaganda and not fact. There is no moment in time when the entire people acts in unison in a way worthy of cursing. I would think of asking them to be more unified, but I saw what they accomplished when a small percentage of them were unified, and I saw that would not suit your requirements either.

As that did not match what had been desired from Balaam, new directions were given.

"Alright, so do not look at them as a whole, and do not look at all of them at any one time. Look on just one sliver of them or another, and find something about which to curse them!"

The final missive might go like this:

I am glad you have removed all restraints from me, so I can fully say what I feel needs saying. I wish the groups that are part of my being would act to accomplish even as much as a tenth of the good I found in the Jewish splinter groups. When I looked at the

groups, subtracted the politicians among them (for no politician is truly part of a group - or they are not in politics for long and were never a politician in the first place), and controlled for those aspects they have in common with all other human creatures, I overwhelmingly found two aspects. Caring for and concern about. Why are these not negatives? I looked, and I discovered that the various splinter groups cared about different things. Some were concerned about and for God, others are concerned about and for how their people are living, larger splinters are concerned about all minorities upon the planet, and still others are concerned about the planet itself. I searched even deeper, to find some that were indifferent to all of these things, and I found something strange. Those who expressed indifference wound up inspiring many who were not indifferent to care even deeper and act upon their concerns. Indeed, when you sent me to curse these people, it must be because you have despaired of getting them to stop caring, and with the curse you could convince them to do so. In the end, you will either care like they do, or you will become merely an aspect of history, something experts will know about.

In the Torah text, Balaam goes on to tell a number of nations how they will be lost on the shores of history. Our modern expert fears trying to predict that much of the future.

How have you been expressing caring for and concern about recently? How have you let others do so for you?