

PARSHAT BALAK 5776: BILAAM AND THE NEW ANTI-SEMITISM

By Rabbi Perlman

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The Torah is filled with tales of people making moral errors sometimes deliberate, sometimes by mistake, sometimes they are incited to err as in the case with Dina, sometimes they are seduced as in the case of Adam and Eve, sometimes they are punished, sometimes they are pardoned.

We know well the story of David and Natan after the Bathsheba affair. The prophet Natan tells the parable of a rich man owning many sheep and a poor man owning only one sheep, and the desire of the rich man to own the one sheep belonging to the poor man. On a day when the a traveler visited the rich man, the rich man wanted to entertain the traveler and give him a good meal. However, he was loathe to slaughter from his own flock, so he slaughtered the sheep belonging to the poor man. David reacts to the parable saying the rich man should die for being so insensitive and Natan explained to him that the rich man in the parable was the king himself.

What is not observed, says the Tzror Hamor, the Spanish medieval commentator, is that the anonymous traveler is first described casually encountering the rich man; no mention is made of his expecting or asking to be fed or entertained. Later on, he is described as the rich man's guest.

Who is this mysterious traveler?

The traveler in the parable is the evil inclination, who appears completely harmlessly at first and then causes the rich man to invite him. It does not take long for the traveler to be referred to as ish, a man of substance. He uses guile to become more than a house guest in his prospective victim's home.

The Israelites in our parsha are put in the same position. In th story of what happened at Shittim, they are led by the evil instinct into getting into bed with the enemy.

Bilaam speaks out of both sides of his mouth. He tries to curse the Israelites. He flatters the Israelites with Mah Tov. He knows that he cannot defeat God. Defying the risk of appearing as a fool, he sets up the event at Shittim. When he cannot perform his wicked act with a hex, he turns naturally to sex. He invites himself in to the community, a kind of itinerant merchant along way with wares to sell and trinkets to buy. Maybe even candy. I think of the "child catcher" of Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. He lures them. He plays on their weakness, their sexual urges. 24,000 men are killed as a result of this single event.

Bilaam as the classic anti-semite. Talks out of both sides of his mouth. Story told from the point of view of another nation. We have a bird's eye on how these people Israel are regarded in the world. Why are they so feared and despised?

Question of suspicion, fear, and hatred threads itself from Pharaoh to Amalekites to Edom and to Balak and Bilaam. Unfortunately, the Jews continue to survive despite destruction and martyrdom and still the anti-semites whether they declare war against us or undermine our existence keep popping up like moles in that Pop-a- Mole game at Kennywood.

This month the Greater Pittsburgh Rabbinical Association drafted a statement against a new kind of anti-Semitism that undermines and delegitimizes the State of Israel through a Palestinian directed campaign called Boycott Divestment and Sanctions. It is something we need to learn more about because it doesn't reflect just anti-Israel sentiment. Its goal is to malign Israel with lies about the so-called occupation comparing Israel to an apartheid state that needs to be dismantled, not for noble ideals of equality but for reasons of destroying Jewish life, business, expression, and research in the Jewish state.

Some quotations from the letter:

"The BDS movement claims to oppose only Israeli policies in order to move the government toward a peaceful settlement of the conflict with the Palestinians. The statements of its founder, Omar Barghouti, however, betray its true purpose:

"(Palestinians have a right to) resistance by any means, including armed resistance. (Jews) aren't indigenous just because you say you are...[Jews] are not a people. The UN's principle of the right to self-determination applies only to colonized people who want to acquire their rights."

"(The one state solution means) a unitary state, where, by definition, Jews will be a minority."

"A Jewish state in Palestine in any shape or form cannot but contravene the basic rights of the indigenous Palestinian population and perpetuate a system of racial discrimination that ought to be opposed categorically...Definitely, most definitely we oppose a Jewish state in any part of Palestine. No Palestinian, rational Palestinian, not a sell-out Palestinian, will ever accept a Jewish state in Palestine."

(Omar Barghouti quotes cited by Adam Levick [6/8/16] in response to article by Rachael Revesz in the UK daily "Independent" published 6/7/16)

These statements by the founder of the BDS movement are incompatible with Israel's status as a legitimate member-state of the United Nations, accepted by that body since November 29, 1947.

All BDS actions are designed to delegitimize Israel. All BDS actions target Zionism, the national liberation movement of the Jewish people for more than a century, as immoral. We reject both of these categorizations.

When other countries act immorally, from mass murder of more than 400,000 in Syria to genocide in Sudan, we decry their acts but never question their right to exist as nations. Only Israel's existence is ever questioned on moral grounds.

This leads us to conclude that the BDS movement is based on anti-Semitism, not merely opposition to Israel's national policies. Jews do constitute a people. Jews have a right to a national home based on their history, language and culture as do other countries who have or aspire to the same goal.

That national home is called Israel and we proudly support its right to exist even as we work to make it a just society for all of its inhabitants: Jews, Arab Muslims and Christians, Palestinians, Bedouin and Druze.

We support Israel as a Jewish, democratic nation even as we strongly support efforts to achieve a lasting, just peace with the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza.

Omar Barghouti and BDS claim that Israel is apartheid. We agree instead with Leon Jamaine Mithi, who grew up under apartheid in South Africa:

“I used to support the BDS movement, but I withdrew my support after I visited Israel and Palestine (the West Bank)...I have to say that calling Israel an apartheid state is an insult to black South Africans who suffered under the now defunct system of strict racial segregation...the term has been appropriated to wrongly label Israel when referring to conflict with Palestine.” (5/10/16)

In my own research, I have been shocked by organizations and individuals who have signed on to the BDS movement, countries like Sweden, Ireland and The Netherlands. Organizations like Amnesty International, the ACLU International Federation for Human Rights, companies like Reebok and Orange, churches, artists like Meg Ryan, Dustin Hoffman, Coldplay, Lenny Kravitz. Stevie Wonder, Elvis Costello and author Alice Walker (Color Purple).

BDS is not about mutual reconciliation; it is a one sided fantasy of what would happen if the Middle East were suddenly Judenrein. If they cannot do it with missiles or hijackings or terror, then they can stamp us as politically incorrect and have the world flocking to their side. As vis Costello once wrote, Whats so funny about Peace, Love, and Understanding?

This was Balaam's aim. He refuses to give up. He is sneaky like the serpent in the Garden of Eden. He refrained from speaking hatred of Israel. But he could plot ways to take advantage of human weakness and undermine them.

Anti-Semitism takes many forms. Today's Bilaams sound off about their regard for the Jewish people but collaborate in schemes hatched by true haters of Israel to eviscerate the Jewish people from their land. May we be spared these hypocrites, these Bilaams, and watch for the plotters who would entice us away from our true values.