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“No Curse Can Hold”: Parshat Balak and the Power of Ahavat Yisrael

I don't think I've ever been as excited to relearn Parshat Balak as I was this year. As a nation still reeling from the recent Operation “Rising Lion”—a name drawn directly from our Parsha's verse “עם כלבא יקום” (“A nation shall rise like a lion”)—I couldn't help but feel that this week's Torah portion is more alive and relevant than ever. These were words originally intended as a curse by Bilam, the infamous non-Jewish prophet hired by Balak to annihilate Am Yisrael with words alone. And yet, they became a source of blessing, strength, and pride.

How can we explain this transformation of Bilam's intention of curses to the actualization of blessings?

There are so many lessons to learn from

this very point. Firstly, the power of words—in blessings and curses. מוות וחיים ביד הלשון. Life and death are in the power of the tongue. We as humans have the profound ability to use verbal language. It's a gift and ought to be used wisely.

Secondly, each time Bilam was unsuccessful in delivering his curses, he moved locations thinking that would help. Can we escape Hashem? When God wants something, He can find us anywhere.

Bilam, a supposed master prophet, is repeatedly unable to utter the curses he's hired to deliver. Almost humorously, a donkey opens its mouth and rebukes its rider. Bilam, known for his precise control of language, stammers and fails. But beneath the surface of this near-comic narrative lies one of the most profound spiritual principles in the Torah: when the Jewish people are united, no curse in the world can take hold.

The Gemara in Sanhedrin 105b reveals the true intent behind Bilam's efforts. It wasn't just to curse us with words, but to disconnect us from our Source. He knew that if Am Yisrael could be separated from Hashem, the spiritual protection we enjoy would fall away. But he failed—because even in our lowest

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moments, even after the most grievous sins—as long as we remain connected to each other, we remain tethered to Hashem.

Take for example Bilam's so-called "curse":

"הן עם לבדד ישכון ובגויים לא יתחשב"

"Behold, a nation that dwells alone, not counted among the nations".

Bilam intended we would assimilate, disappear into the masses. Instead, his words declared an eternal truth: we remain distinct, protected not by numbers or alliances, but by our unique connection to Hashem.

For his third attempt to curse the Jewish nation, Bilam turns toward the desert—וישת אל המדבר פניו—perhaps hoping to invoke the memory of our greatest national sin, the Golden Calf, which occurred in that wilderness. But the words that follow shock even him:

וישא בלעם את עיניו. וירא את ישראל שוכן לשבטיו. ותהי עליו רוח אלוקים.

"Bilam raised his eyes and saw Israel encamped according to its tribes, and the spirit of God rested upon him."

What changed? Rashi explains: Bilam saw that each tribe maintained its individuality, its privacy, and its modesty.

The Slonimer expands on לשבטיו - we are as one, united tribe. It was precisely this unity that triggered Divine protection. Our Sages explain that in order to have אהבת ה' (love of God) we must first have אהבת ישראל (love for our fellow Jew). When we truly love each other, we open the channel to love Hashem.

When Bilam saw how each שבט (tribe), cared and respected each other, he understood: this bond between the people and Hashem cannot be severed. No curse will prevail.

The שבטים (twelve tribes) were not

identical. Some were scholars, others warriors, farmers, artisans, merchants, and teachers. Yaakov Avinu deliberately blessed each child differently, affirming their individuality while binding them into a single collective mission. Unity in diversity wasn't a flaw—it was the design.

This idea echoes the teachings of the Apter Rav, Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heshel of Apta, known as the Ohev Yisrael. He famously taught that every single parsha in the Torah contains a lesson in Ahavat Yisrael. In our parsha, Balak, his students challenged him: where is the lesson in love here?

He answered it is in the very name of the parsha- Balak.

BaLaK—spelled בִּלְק—is an acronym, he said, for the phrase "ואהבת לרעך כמוך" ("Love your neighbor as yourself").

His students objected: "But it's not the same letters!"

To which the Apter Rav replied:

"באהבת ישראל לא מדקדקים באותיות"

"When it comes to loving other Jews, don't get caught up in exact letters".

If you're always nitpicking details, you'll never reach love.

Ahavat Yisrael means seeing beyond flaws, imperfections, and ideological or any other

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differences. It means recognizing that every Jew, even one who sins or struggles, is still part of the camp, still beloved by Hashem. And that, perhaps, is the ultimate defense against our enemies.

As we approached the 17th of Tammuz, I was certain we wouldn't fast this year. I truly believed Zechariah's prophecy would come true:

"The fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months will be transformed into joy and celebration" (Zechariah 8:19).

But it seems we still have some work to do. Perhaps we are not yet fully שוכן לשבטינו —dwelling together with mutual love and respect.

Still, Parshat Balak reminds us: we're close. The power to turn curses into blessings lies not in the mouths of prophets or enemies, but in Hashem's 'hand'- based on the way we love, care for, and unite with one another.

When we embody "ואהבת לרעך כמוך", no curse can take hold. Not even Bilam's. ■

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