



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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“Balaam and Dostoevsky”

Frustration. Disillusionment. But also insight and a lifelong intellectual perspective. That is how I would describe the experience I am about to share with you, dear reader.

It all started with Dostoevsky. That’s right, Fyodor Dostoevsky, the famous 19th century Russian novelist, author of *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, and much more. His works were strangely not part of the curriculum of the high school I

attended. I came to his writing on my own.

How impressed I was! Here was a writer who really plumbed the depths of the human psyche. He grappled, not only with profound moral issues, but with questions of existential religious significance.

I vividly remember reading *Notes from the Underground*, astounded by the fact that a gentle author, living in Czarist Russia, had so much to say to a Brooklyn yeshiva boy.

And then I learned a bit about Dostoevsky’s background. I was stunned to discover that this perceptive, sensitive and gifted man was... a vicious anti-Semite. I had great difficulty in reconciling the discrepancy between the art – sophisticated and empathic; and the author, full of primitive hatred, which I experienced as aimed at me. After all, my ancestors lived in the towns and villages he describes – and not long ago!

I experienced this disillusionment time and time again in subsequent years. In college, I became enamored with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, who was often acclaimed as the greatest thinker of the 20th century. Then I learned of his support for the Nazi regime, and I could no longer bring myself to even open his books.

This experience was repeated later in my education when I became familiar with the psychology of Carl Jung, only to discover his

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complicated relationship with Jews and Judaism, and his pro-Nazi sentiments. What an exhaustive list of gifted men who possessed such talent when it came to humanity, yet who were so absurdly tainted by their active aversion to our people. It extends back in time to Martin Luther, persists through the music of Wagner and the history of Toynbee, and is certainly not lacking for contemporary examples.

Truth be told, the list goes back even further, to this week's Torah portion, *Parshat Balak*, and the extraordinary and fascinating man named Balaam. If there is one lesson to learn from this week's narrative of Balaam and his encounter with the Jewish people, it is this: A man can be a universally acclaimed spiritual leader, and a gifted poet and orator with prophetic powers almost identical to those of Moses, and simultaneously be a vile anti-Semite, capable of genocidal schemes.

Read this week's *parsha* very carefully, for there is an essential message in it. The message is that we dare not assume that we need only fear anti-Semitism at the hands of maniacs, fanatics, or ignoramuses. Quite the contrary! Sophisticated, educated and highly cultured individuals can also detest us and conspire to destroy us.

This is the lesson of the Holocaust. True, Hitler was hardly an intellectual or artistic giant. But his evil genius lay in his ability to realize that the most advanced civilization in the history of the world would eagerly abide by his murderous vision. He knew how this was just the veneer of German art, literature, philosophy and, yes, religion.

In terms of this week's Torah portion, he knew what Balak knew: That there are individuals with:

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Strong religious commitments: “I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord my God to do anything small, or great.” (*Numbers* 22:18);

A direct spiritual channel to the Divine: “And God came unto Balaam at night, and said unto him...” (*ibid.* verse 20)

Inventive skills sufficient to create a phrase which we ourselves adopted to preface our daily prayers: “How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob...” (*Numbers* 24:5).

But in actuality, they are no more than “hired guns,” and beneath the façade of the “gentleman” lies the “agreement” to discriminate, persecute, murder and exterminate an entire people.

It is a difficult lesson to accept. But our history has long established its deep-rooted veracity and its urgency, clearly based upon the story we read this Shabbat. ■