

Balak – 5782

This week's parsha is a very unusual one because of the story it teaches and the inclusion of a talking donkey in the narrative along the way. Essentially, the story being told in the pages we cover today is one that relates directly to precisely the same kind of dynamic that is playing itself this very week in headlines and news clips flashing around the world. In the parsha, Balak is a ruler of Moab, which is the same Moab that Moshe's father-in-law Yitro came from, who complains essentially about his neighbour. He suggests that they are so numerous, he can't see the ground, but in many other ways, he is actually suggesting he is not happy about them at all. Not believing he can defeat them on his own, he enlists an a-list magician and conjurer to help him rid the neighbourhood of the unwanted newcomers. However, the scheme cooked up between the two of them does not actually work because HaShem has intervened on behalf of his chosen people and makes Balaam, the magician say only good things, not bad things, when speaking to the Children of Israel and, in the end, praises them, rather than condemns them, and his magic thereby does not work.

I hope my narration of the plot summary rings enough bells that you can see how I am drawing the parallel to the visit to Jerusalem and Jeddah of Joseph Biden, president of the United States and how he sings the praises of Israel, more or less, during his visit. The first time I went to Israel, in 1964, my good friend, the inventor Benny Landa, got down from the steps of the plane we arrived on and kissed the ground, which was a very common thing to do back in the day. One could almost hear Biden saying what Balaam sang at the end of the story.... How goodly are thy tents oh Jacob, thy

dwelling places oh Israel. Surely, nothing is truer than that today and it is easy to imagine Balaam feeling the same way. But what exactly is it that both Balaam and Biden as well as all my friends who were with me getting off that plane in Tel Aviv in late August 1964 as well as all the countless visitors to the modern State of Israel have or had to sing about?

It is not hard to think of an answer to that question when we think about arriving in Israel today, or even back in 1964, but what about 2500 years ago or more when today's narrative began? The sages point to the distinctiveness of the life and the camp of the Children of Israel and the proof of that is found in the episode that seems to bring our parsha to an end. The women of Moab lure and entice the men of the tribes to engage in pagan worship and rites. Needless to say, HaShem became incensed and when one couple dared to flaunt their practices in the face of the rest of the tribes, swift action was taken and literally thousands were slaughtered on the spot. The sages, in their interpretations of the text, point out that far more people were slaughtered at Baal Peor than at the foot of Sinai because of the Golden Calf and from this, the rabbis reinforce the concept of the Jewish people being set apart from all the others. Of being a distinctive people who hold values and behaviours to a higher standard than the nations around them.

This theme of remembering our covenant with HaShem and the bargain struck at Sinai is something that I have referred to before. Remember that we are talking about the assembled tribes of Israel who are only JUST, literally JUST, out of slavery and they are wandering in the desert for 40 years. They are struggling to become the Nation of Israel rather than the children of Israel and they have been told explicitly to be different from Egypt and to hold themselves apart. This wall between ourselves and other nations begun in Sinai has been part of our existence for 2500 years and no

wonder the rest of the world has trouble understanding and accepting us. Like Balak, we have been subjected to judgement from outside and not just because we were accused of deicide in the death of Jesus but also because we held ourselves apart, we marched to our own drummer, so to speak, even though those marching orders came from HaShem. Seldom did anyone bother to look at us from inside, but rather from outside. How Goodly are you tents oh Jacob, your dwelling places oh Israel. In the medieval and even the modern world didn't and doesn't know how to deal with the people of the book, the keepers of Kashrut, the Jews who have their Sabbath on Saturday not Sunday and so forth. WE have always been a people apart but as the rabbis through the generations have pointed out because we were and we kept the Shabbat and we observed the mitzvot, we have maintained our identity and a people and a faith.

Going forward we need to find a new way to be a people apart and yet a people living among others like us. Until we can figure out how to do that, and ensure we pass those same ideas on to the next generation, we will struggle to fulfill the beauty inherent in the words we recite EVERY single morning before we really begin to daven.....Ma Tov, Ohalecha Yaakov, Mishekenotecha Yisrael.