

## A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Balak)

*Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*

From Rav Binny

Three boys; three worlds; three families; three mothers broken; three empty chairs; forever....

There are simply no words to describe the depths of our pain, the sense of loss. Three beautiful trees uprooted, who will never grow to give the beautiful fruit their parents had cultivated; so many dreams lost....

Our enemies are smiling today because they think they have won a battle, on the way to winning the war they have been fighting for so many years. A war we never wanted and for which we would give so much to end. But our enemies are mistaken; they do not know the secret of the Jewish people. How many great empires, so determined to destroy us, over how many thousands of years, thought they could cut off our future by killing the best and brightest of our children, and where are they all now?

Like Ancient Egypt and the Canaanite Nations, the Assyrians and Arameans, the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and Romans, the Byzantines and Medieval Crusaders, the Spanish inquisition and Chmelnitzki's Cossacks, the Mamelukes and Ottomans, and the final unspeakable horror, the Nazis, our enemies still think they can physically destroy us. But they are wrong. Like the broken pieces of Roman glass scattered all over Israel, they are long gone; dust in the wind. And we are still here.

And this week's portion of Balak is an appropriate one indeed.

*“ Vayagar Moav me'od mipnei ha'am ki rav hu ”*

*“ And (the nation of) Moav was very afraid of the nation (of Israel) for they were great. ”*

Why were the Moabites so afraid? What were they scared of? And why is this detail important?

Is there is a value to the fact that our enemies fear us?

Living in Gush Etzion, these past few weeks have been more than intense, as thousands of Israeli soldiers, joined by thousands of local volunteers have been working day and night to find our three missing boys.

Leaving literally no stone unturned, no well or cistern unchecked and no lead unfollowed, one can see the soldiers everywhere, day and night, refusing to give in to exhaustion; determined to bring these boys home to the arms of their waiting families.

And at the same time, the response of the Jewish people all over the world has been an incredible outpouring of prayer, spirituality and acts of loving-kindness.

Here in Israel, Israelis who never stepped foot in a synagogue came to pray; hundreds of thousands of Shabbat candles were lit all over Israel, and specific psalms (121 & 130) have been recited daily, even at weddings & joyous occasions, as an entire Nation longed to see her boys safely returned. Often, we speak of the need for Jewish unity, but these past weeks, such words have not been necessary, as the entire Jewish people have put aside their differences in common cause for something greater; something so basic it cannot be denied or ignored: the right of every mother everywhere to know her innocent child is safe and protected.

Not surprising really, this outpouring of Jewish love, caring and unity; it is who we are; in our darkest moments, our light often shines brightest.

Equally unsurprising however, is the deafening silence that seemed to emanate from most of the known world. Where was the instant condemnation from the E.U. one sees as soon as a room is added on to a house over the green line, in Judea and Samaria? Was Catherine Ashton just too busy? Are we surprised that the twenty two Arab nations surrounding us are more concerned with locked cisterns broken into, than kidnapped teenage Jewish boys? Is anyone besides Israel and the Jewish people troubled by an Arab leader who denounces the kidnappings while signing a joint government agreement with the kidnappers?

This week's portion of Balak has much to say regarding this entire question, but one interesting point is worth noting.

The nations' fear of the Jewish people did not begin with this week's story of Balak the king of Moav; it was already duly noted upon the Jews' exodus from Egypt and the splitting of the sea:

***“Az namogu kol yoshvei Ke’naan...”***

***“Then **did all the nations of Canaan tremble...**”***

Forty years earlier, upon witnessing the miracles G-d wrought for the Jewish people, the nations of Canaan trembled. They knew even then where the Jewish people were headed:

***“Tevi’eimo ve’titaeimo be’har nachalatcha ...”***

***“(G-d will) **bring them and plant them on the mount of your inheritance...**”***

Abraham Yitzchak and Yaakov were still world famous personalities; indeed Yaakov had been buried in the land of Israel in a massive public ceremony that had the Canaanites wondering; so it was clear the Jewish people were planning on coming home. And the nations of Canaan were indeed terrified. Indeed, less than a year later, the spies sent by Joshua are told by Rachav of Jericho, that the entire land is afraid of the impending Israeli conquest. (Joshua 2:9)

The Talmud tells us the Canaanite nations were given a choice, to accept the seven Noachide laws, meaning they would have to commit not to steal, murder or practice child sacrifice, in which case they could stay in the land. But building an ethical society would mean everyone had to subscribe to a minimum of basic ethics. And this they could not and would not do.

Perhaps today history has come full circle. The Nation of Israel has built a haven of democracy and ethics in a Middle east populated by dictatorships and inhumane behavior. And one cannot build an ethical world next to unethical neighbors. So they know that one of us will have to let go.

Seeing the destruction of the Emorites (even before the Nation of Israel does battle with the great Og king of the Bashan) and recalling how this Nation miraculously defeated Egypt, the greatest empire of its day, Balak, the king of Moav has figured out that we cannot be defeated on the battlefield, unless we are first defeated spiritually, to which end he enlists the help of the non-Jewish prophet Bilaam.

And Balak is correct; our physical battlefield strength is entirely due to our spiritual strength; as much as it is a mitzvah to join the army and fight our enemies who would destroy us; without our true Commander in Chief, Hashem directing the results, all the military prowess in the world would not make a difference.

That being said, we are not meant to rely on miracles, and one of the cardinal rules learned in any military command school is the true value of deterrence. As an IDF officer commanding men in difficult battle situations, whether in Lebanon or in Arab cities and towns during the intifada, how we carried ourselves, and the energy we gave off often had a direct impact on the level of resistance we encountered.

Hamas stopped firing missiles into Israeli population centers when they saw that the price was too high. After operation Cast lead, when thousands of Israeli troops entered the Gaza strip (notwithstanding the questions of whether that mission was a complete success and whether we should subsequently have left...) Hamas concluded the price was too great as did Hezbollah post second Lebanon War, albeit temporarily for now. There is a correct assessment that at least for now, Hamas in the West, Hezbollah in the North, and Syria on our Eastern front all fear an Israeli response sufficiently to create a reasonable deterrence for the moment.

But they need us to be afraid, and they want us to be weak, so they finally succeeded in what they believe will be a weakening blow; they kidnapped our children. Figuring now we will be afraid; afraid to hitchhike, afraid to hike the hills and valleys of our beautiful country, and afraid to live in any and every Jewish town and village....

But they have made a mistake; because they have not weakened us, they have made us stronger; just as Europe and the world's (for the most part) deafening silence does not cause us pain; it simply reminds us of whom we are.

Over three thousand years ago, this same Bilaam, calls out:

“... *Am levadad yishkon...*” “... *they are a Nation that dwells alone...*” (Bamidbar (Numbers) 23:8-9)

It was foretold a long time ago that we would have to get used to living alone. In fact, that is a part of who we are. The prophet Isaiah (Yishayahu) describes us as meant to be a “light unto the Nations “.

Our mission is to show the world how a people can be; how an ethical society is meant to look, and how different a G-d filled world could be. And to do that, for now, we need to be apart. Apart does not necessarily have to mean alone but at least it means we are visible; we are able to be a model the world can see.

And so while our enemies dance on rooftops when missiles fall on civilian homes, we dance at weddings celebrating life and sing of peace. And when they kidnap our children hoping to make us feel all alone, we come together in prayer and determination.

Perhaps one day the world will be ready to take a stand; to recognize that might does not make right; right is just... right. Perhaps one day soon our Arab neighbors will learn that holding out a hand in friendship is not weakness, it is strength; but we are not there yet, or at least they aren't. So for now, we will watch our soldiers do what they need to do through long and lonely nights, and we will stand alone, for a world that can be, and one day will be, so much better.

For now, we will come together and feel the pain of Eyal, Gilad and Naftali's families ; we will do our best to comfort they who can never be fully comforted; we will adjust to a world made crueler, and we will do our best to hand our enemies a great defeat, by becoming even more one.

Every Jew everywhere, indeed every human being everywhere who cares that the world should be a better one and that those who spew hatred should never think their barbarism pays off, should think carefully how we can send that message.

They think killing our children will make Jews scared to come to Israel? Book a ticket this week to come home to Israel, even for a visit.

They think murdering our sons will cause us only tears? Find a mitzvah that gives a smile to someone who really needs one.

They think we will lose faith? Let every one of us take upon him herself a learning project in Jewish tradition, some form of Torah study.

They think kidnapping three boys hitchhiking home at the end of a day of Torah study will leave those who live in Yehuda ve'Shomoron (Judea and Samaria) feeling cast aside and alone? Find a way to let those whose children hitch on the roads of Gush Etzion and Hebron feel they are not alone.

For thousands of years we have educated our children towards peace, love and mutual understanding. Perhaps it is time we take the education of our enemies' children out of their hands and finally educate a generation of Arab children towards that same peace, love and mutual understanding.

Shabbat Shalom,  
Binny Freedman