

Balak: The War of Words

- Nisson Shulman.

Today we are fighting a war of words - on many fronts. This is reflected in the Parsha which can teach us lessons for fighting this war.

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In our Torah portion we see two great antagonists, Bilaam and Moshe. Legend has it that the antagonism began in Moses' childhood when Bilaam, as Pharaoh's advisor, counseled that the child, newly adopted by Pharaoh's daughter, be put to death.

Be that as it may, we find Bilaam in our portion, the archenemy of Jews, and Moses their leader.

The Rabbis, quoted by Rashi, call their enmity a war of words. "What", they ask, "is Moab doing seeking Midian's counsel and advice? They were sworn enemies of old!" "But now", continue the Rabbis, "they were united in hatred of Israel". They were looking for a common strategy against the Jewish people that had suddenly emerged as an unbeatable foe. Israel had just defeated Sichon and Og, Kings of the Emorites and the Bashanites, the two strongest kings in the area, who were in fact guardians of the gateway to the Promised Land. Now they were camped hard by Moab, and Moab was sorely afraid.

True, Israel sought peace. They didn't want to invade or conquer Moab. But Moab didn't believe them. In their warlike, militaristic minds, they couldn't conceive of a powerful nation that had the might to conquer them, but that would actually seek peace.

So they sought a strategy: a way to defeat this great and mighty people. Therefore they went to Midian, to discover, as Rashi explains, Moses' weakness. Where was he vulnerable? After all, Moses had spent a long time in Midian: some say even 60 years! That people surely would know his weaknesses.

And the answer of the Midianites? Kocho bepe. His power is in words. Is that not strange? Moses – the stutterer, the stammerer, halting of speech – that his strength should be in his tongue?

Not strange at all. The power of Moses was not in the way he spoke, but in what he said. Moses' power was in the words of the Torah. The people were armed with the word of God!

"Very well", said Moab. "We'll fight words with words! We'll attack them through Bilaam, a man whose power is also in words. Let Bilaam be brought to curse Israel. lechu na, ara li et haam haze.

We tend to consider Bilaam's verbal attack a failure. After all, the curses that were in his heart, were, on his tongue, transformed by Almighty God into blessings. From his lips came one of the most stirring passages of praise of our people, Ma tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishkenotecha

Yisrael, a passage we recite whenever we enter a Synagogue, because our Rabbis explain that he was referring to the sanctuary and the school of learning when he spoke of Ohal and Mishkan.

But there are other ways to use the tongue with telling, devastating effect. Bilaam did so, with crafty advice, teaching Balak that if he could only succeed in corrupting the people, seducing them away from God and His laws of morality, then without God's protection they would be powerless.

That is what happened. The people began to sin with Moab's and Midian's daughters. Moses and Aaron were powerless. If not for Pinhas' heroism that we will read about next week, Bilaam would have succeeded. And that would have been the end of our people.

Obviously, one of the important lessons for us in all this, is that our people's struggle for survival is not only against the sword and the guns of the enemy, but often the struggle is a war of words. It is a war of ideologies that we fight. For a time during our recent remembrance, the worst manifestation of this war was behind the Iron Curtain. That threat is over and has given way to other manifestations of this war of words.

For the war of words takes different forms. We have seen this in our history.

Sometimes, it was a small thing, an expression of anti-Semitism easily turned aside by a brilliant mind and sharp tongue of a sage or scholar or great man of our people; such as when an anti-Semitic nobleman called out to the philosopher Mendelssohn, "SWINE!" Whereupon Mendelssohn executed a quick little bow and said, "Mendelssohn". Or there is the story about Sir Moses Montefiore, who was sitting next to just such an anti-Semitic nobleman at dinner. "Just been to Japan," barked the Duke. "Interesting country. No pigs and no Jews." "Then you and I should go there at once. Then it would have one of each...."

More usually, it was serious and dangerous; as when Apion, the worst anti-Semite in ancient Greece, invented the myths later to be incorporated into the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, against whom the Jewish philosopher Philo led our verbal defense. Or when Pablo Christianus disputed in the Spanish court of King James of Arragone against Nachmanides in 1263, which later caused Nachmanides to be exiled and to finally make his way to Eretz Yisrael.

Or the words of "St." John of Chrysostome, called in his church history "The Gentle Golden Mouthed", but who for Jews had words like "vipers, murderers," and who finished his passionate attacks upon the Synagogue with the words "Whatever name even more horrible that could be found will never be worse than the Synagogue deserves".

In all of this and throughout history it has been our bitter experience that verbal attacks usually are followed or accompanied by physical violence. But not always did our enemies find this necessary. Sometimes the verbal violence was even more dangerous in itself than physical violence, and that was when it took the form of a war against the Torah, against our faith, not against Jews, but against Judaism. That is what made the Soviet threat at that time so great. And equally great is the threat of indifference and ignorance of Torah which we perceive in every quarter in free and open societies.

Thus, today, the war of words is being waged on three fronts: There is the propaganda war, the Intifada being only part of it, and Jews in European communities are as much on the front line of this war of words as are the members of the Press Corps of Israel.

There is the political war waged on many fronts but particularly vitriolic in the United Nations. Jean Kirkpatrick once said – when she was US Ambassador to the United Nations, that "People tend to shrug off verbal abuse, saying that sticks and stones can hurt my bones but names will never harm me. They do not realize the immeasurable harm words can do. Words can change friends into foes, allies into enemies. Words can start wars. Words can undermine economies and devastate societies. Words can destroy values and even cultures. All this words can do. Do you wonder why I am concerned about the lies that are told daily in the United Nations about Israel and about the free world?" This war is being fought against the state of Israel with lies and accusations, and waged even by the very institutions of the United Nations which should be fair and impartial.

And there is another battlefield is right here at home, in every Jewish home, at every social club, especially in every university, where values are being taught and copied, and where the importance of Jewish learning is weighed and decisions about continued Jewish life and loyalty taken.

If you want to visualize this war, think of Bilaam and Moses, two antagonists, not of battle but of ideology. Consider Bilaam's values, of Benot Moav, of available sex with everyone, and available marriage with other nations, and against this the Torah, with Moses commanding morality, values of family, of decency and modesty. So on this battleground war is waged against the inroads of intermarriage; against the blurring of the line between Jew and Gentile. Our Rabbis tell us that from the blessings unwillingly wrung from Bilaam's mouth you can perceive the curses that were in his heart. In this spirit consider Bilaam's statement that *hen am levadad yishkon ubagoyim lo yitchashav*, that "We are a people unique, dwelling alone, and that we do not consider what the nations of the world do or say, we have our own set of values"; and against this consider that in America the vast majority of Jewish children still do not attend Day Schools, except in enclaves of Jewish ghettos like Teaneck and Monsey and Boro Park; In England there are still many Jewish parents who are afraid to send their children to Jewish Day Schools because they would be "handicapped" in their effort to belong to the British "society". Many of today's Jews, whose every concern is what will the goyim say. Consider this and recognize these people as playing right into Bilaam's hands, into the hands of the arch enemy of the Jews, because none better than he realized that we are lost if we lose our uniqueness. Consider this and remember that the secret of the uniqueness of the Jew, is the Torah and its commandments. Moses, our teacher and leader, standing against Bilaam, and demanding that we shall be separate and unique, a holy people where every person is a priest of God.....

Moses will win this war. His followers will outlast the Bilaams of this world. The nations may rage, *lama ragshu goyim*, to no avail. The Torah will continue to be our life. Those Jews who support it and strengthen it and study it will prevail.

That is the meaning of the Torah taught in the Yeshivoth of Israel and throughout the world;

That is the meaning of the Kol Demama Daka that is more powerful than the might of nations and the enmity of all the Bilaams we ever faced and shall face.

Ma tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishkenotecha Yisrael, elu bate kneset ubate midrash. And is more than a truism. It is the secret of our survival. And we pray for God's help and inspiration to be loyal to its vision.