For Shabbat July 12, 2008--Balak

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Thoughts on Parashat Balak

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Balak, king of Moab, hired Bil'am to curse the people of Israel. Balak feared the advancing Israelites, and believed that Bil'am had the power to curse enemies and thereby destroy them. The Torah portion describes Bil'am's various attempts to curse Israel--but each time, God put words of blessing into his mouth. He simply was not able to curse Israel.

The Israelites would have been totally unaware of the machinations of Balak and Bil'am. But even if they had been aware and even if Bil'am had uttered a curse--what difference would that have made? Surely we do not believe in the efficacy of curses. Certainly we believe that God's will prevails and that no evil words could have changed God's will to bring the Israelites into the Land of Israel.

Perhaps this story has a deeper meaning. Even though a curse has no objective power, yet it may cause significant damage if the one so cursed takes it to heart. If the victim of a curse believes that the curse can hurt him, then indeed the curse can cause the victim to behave in ways that will make the curse into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

We can understand this phenomenon by applying it to mundane contexts. A parent tells a child he/she is stupid, or dull witted. The child may in fact be very intelligent; yet, hearing a parent label him/her as being stupid or dull witted may cause the child to internalize this image of him/herself. The child may lose confidence and self-respect. Another example: a teacher tells a student he/she is poor in math, or has no head for Talmud. The child might actually have aptitude in these subjects if properly taught. Yet, the child, upon hearing the teacher's evaluation, may give up on these subjects, may feel that he/she will never grasp them properly. Another example: a coach or parent tells a child he/she is not good in a particular sport, or is a poor athlete. A child might have become better at the sport or might have developed athletic skills--but now that the coach or parent has "cursed" him/her, there's no point in trying any longer.

The point is that negative words can indeed produce negative results. Even if the "curse" has no independent power, it can undermine the victim's confidence, self-

esteem, willingness to try. Perhaps the story of Bil'am is teaching all of us how careful we must be with our words, how studiously we should avoid using negative "curses" to stereotype others and to cause them to be stunted in their development.