Decisively Indecisive: Thoughts for Parashat Balak

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Angel for Shabbat: Hukkat/Balak

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Parashat Balak begins (Bemidbar 22:2): “And Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Ammorites.” Interestingly, the Torah doesn’t tell us at this point who Balak is!

The passage then continues with two verses describing how the Moabites feared the advent of the large contingent of Israelites. Only at the end of verse 4 are we informed that “Balak the son of Zippor was king of Moab at that time.” Wouldn’t it have been more logical to tell us from the outset that Balak was king of Moab?

Apparently, the Torah is alluding to aspects of Balak’s personality and leadership style. When Balak first surveyed the problem, he did not know what to do. He did not act in a kingly manner. He vacillated, choosing not to make an independent decision. But then he heard the murmurings of his people. They were afraid. They wanted action against a perceived threat. Only after hearing their complaints did Balak realize he had to make a decision: he was, after all, the king of Moab.

Balak the king still did not know what to do—only that he had to do something to calm his fears and the fears of his people.

A strong and confident king might have presented the people with a clear strategy, such as: 1) we will send emissaries to the Israelites to see what their intentions are; perhaps we can reach a peaceful understanding with them; 2) we will muster our troops and be ready for battle, if necessary; 3) we will reach out to our neighboring allies to see if they will stand with us in our confrontation with the Israelites.

But Balak does not do these things. Rather, he sends emissaries to hire a soothsayer, Bil’am, to curse the Israelites! Balak decides to rely on magic rather than on practical diplomatic and military tactics. He puts his hopes in the skills of a noted orator whose words supposedly had supernatural powers.

But the Torah goes on to make a mockery of this orator soothsayer. Bil’am is outwitted by his own donkey! The donkey sees reality more clearly than he does. And then when Bil’am is supposed to use his great oratorical powers on behalf of Moab, he is unable to utter his intended words. Rather, the Almighty puts words into his mouth that give blessings, rather than curses, to the Israelites.

A weak and frightened king Balak chooses a highly praised—but obviously imperfect--magician: and the problem facing the Moabites is not abated at all.

The story of Balak and Bil’am highlights wrong ways to make decisions. Balak is indecisive and feels he must act only when he senses pressure from the public. When he does make a

decision, it is not based on tested diplomatic and military knowledge, but on wishful thinking, relying on a notorious wonder-worker. Balak and his advisors had an illusion of validity, thinking that their course of action was correct, even though it meant dismissing sound practical tactics in favor of following a smooth-talking soothsayer.

And, of course, Balak and Bil’am failed to achieve their goals.

When making important decisions, one must make pragmatic judgments based on as much fact as possible.

To base decisions on wishful thinking and the aid of glib soothsayers is to follow the leadership style of Balak. Failure is an inevitable result.

Angel for Shabbat