The "Bil'am Effect:" Thoughts for Parashat Balak

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Balak

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The Torah records in great detail how Balak hired Bil'am to curse the Israelites, and how Bil'am ultimately ended up blessing the children of Israel instead. This story is peculiar, in that the Israelites themselves had no awareness of the actions of Balak nor of the words of Bil'am. If the Torah had not recorded this episode, we would have had no knowledge of it at all.

If this story had no impact on the ancient Israelites in the wilderness, perhaps it is intended to provide an important lesson for all future generations. What might that lesson be?

Psychologists have demonstrated that people generally interpret things according to their own preconceived notions. There is a strong tendency to see what we want to see and to hear what we want to hear. In one study, two groups—one favoring capital punishment and one opposing it—were given reports that "proved" that their own opinions were mistaken. After studying the material, none of the participants changed his/her mind. They found fault with the arguments and data that conflicted with their original opinion. Don't confuse us with facts that challenge our views! In another study, people were asked to taste wine from two bottles, one priced $90 a bottle and one priced $10 a bottle. The volunteer wine tasters preferred the more expensive wine, and extolled its virtues in comparison with the inexpensive wine. Yet, the wine in both bottles was identical. The only difference was the price label. Since people expected that expensive wine would be of higher quality, they actually tasted it as being better. Preconceived notions have powerful impact on how we interpret and experience things.

Demagogues well understand how to manipulate people's way of thinking and experiencing. They stoke fears; they promote falsehoods; they attempt to

brainwash the masses. Once people have been suitably brainwashed, their power of reasoning is compromised. They come to interpret data according to the ideas they've absorbed. They will not be swayed by opposing facts, even when the opposing facts happen to be true.

Balak hired Bil'am because Bil'am was a highly regarded "authority" figure. If Balak could get Bil'am to curse the Israelites, Balak's own followers would gain confidence in their ability to defeat the Israelites. Balak's people, who already had negative views of the Israelites, would be re-enforced in those views if a man of Bil'am's stature would endorse their fear and hatred.

Bil'am could be expected to curse the Israelites. First, he too must have felt threatened by the Israelites' successes in their march toward the Promised Land. Second, he was being paid to curse them!

Yet, the amazing aspect of this story is that Bil'am did not curse the Israelites. In spite of his preconceived notions, in spite of his being paid to curse…he blessed the people of Israel! This was a sort of "miracle" defying the expected pattern of human behavior. The Almighty interceded and made Bil'am see the truth about Israel. Bil'am, against his own natural inclinations, was forced to overcome his biases and to see things clearly.

Balak's plan failed. He had expected Bil'am to rally the populace to fight and defeat the Israelites. He had expected Bil'am to follow his ingrained animosities, and not to be influenced by any virtues that the Israelites might have.

It turns out, then, that this story has profound importance for future generations, including our own.

For example, enemies of modern Israel view Israel through the prism of their preconceived notions. They are ready to curse, but are not ready to see the actual virtues of Israel. In order to bolster their biases, they engage "authorities" such as committees at the United Nations, or anti-Israel academics, to spew venom against Israel. It can be assumed in advance that the anti-Israel views will be espoused, regardless of actual facts.

The story of Bil'am demonstrates that it is possible, however unlikely and however miraculous, for people to overcome their biases and to offer blessings instead of curses. It is possible, even if not too likely, for haters to actually open their eyes with compassion, reason, and fairness.

Years ago, I had a warm correspondence with a man who had been a member of the Ku Kux Klan, and who was raised in an environment of hatred of Jews, blacks and other minorities. At some point, he decided he needed to understand more about Jews and Judaism. He got hold of one of my books, and it had an impact on him. He decided to learn more. During the ensuing years, he underwent a conversion to Judaism and became an active leader in his Jewish community. When we did ultimately meet in person, we embraced. He never thought he would hug an Orthodox rabbi, just as I had never imagined hugging a former member of the Ku Kux Klan. But this happened. It is a story of overcoming biases.

When Bil'am blessed Israel, the Torah quotes his words: "The saying of Bil'am son of Beor; and the saying of the man whose eye is opened; the saying of him who hears the words of God, who sees the vision of the Almighty, fallen down, yet with opened eyes" (Bemidbar 24:3-4). The Torah underscores how Bil'am overcame, with God's help, his biases and opened his eyes to see things more clearly and objectively.

In our world today, we are—unfortunately—accustomed to dealing with biased, hate-filled, and dishonest enemies. We sometimes wonder why people abandon reason and fairness in order to maintain hateful prejudices. We know that we must be vigilant in standing up to these demagogues and liars.

But we also know that the "Bil'am effect" is possible. Some special individuals—steeped in animosity and prejudice—can rise above their biases, can open their eyes, can offer blessings rather than curses.

In reporting the story of Balak and Bil'am, the Torah has given us a ray of hope for humanity.

Angel for Shabbat