Angel for Shabbat--Hukat/Balak

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"Wherefore it is said in the book of the Wars of the Lord…" (Bemidbar 21:14)

This week's Torah portion has the only mention of "the book of the Wars of the Lord" (*Sefer Milhamot Hashem*). Commentators and scholars speculate about what was contained in this now lost book. Was it a collection of poems in praise of God? Was it a record of the Israelites' wars? Who had access to this book? Who wrote it?

We don't have answers because we don't have access to the book; nor do we know anyone in the past—beyond the generation of Moses—who had access to the book. Apparently, when the Torah was actually written, the people at that time were familiar with the book of the Wars of the Lord, so the allusion to it would have been understood.

But what about readers in all subsequent generations, including our own? What possible meaning can this book have for us who do not have access to it? Why would the Torah include reference to a book that future generations can't possibly read?

Perhaps some insight can be gained by examining the etymology of the Hebrew word for war: *milhama*. The root of this word is the same as the root for *lehem*, a word used for bread, food, general sustenance. A connection between *milhama* and *lehem* may be that wars are/were often fought over bread i.e. one group fights to gain the possessions of another group.

Taking the meanings of these words together, we offer a suggestion. Instead of translating *Sefer Milhamot Hashem* as book of Wars of the Lord, a better translation might be: book of Sustenances from the Lord. The Israelites kept a record of how God sustained them; this was a means of expressing gratitude and remembering God's ongoing Providence. Sometimes the sustenance was *lehem*, food. For example, the Israelites referred to the manna from heaven as *lehem*. Sometimes the sustenance was that God saved them in times of battle/war. For example, in the Song sung by Moses and the Israelites after crossing the Red Sea, God is referred to symbolically as *Ish Milhama*, Man of War.

Following this interpretation, the Torah's inclusion of reference to *Sefer Milhamot Hashem* is a way of reminding all generations to be grateful for the sustenance provided to us by God. Just as the ancient Israelites were careful to keep a record of God's sustaining deeds, so we too are to be mindful of God's Providence over us.

In a sense, the Book of Sustenances from the Lord (my new translation of *Sefer Milhamot Hashem*) is an invitation to us to keep in mind the blessings we have enjoyed and do enjoy through the beneficence of God. By focusing on what we have, rather than on what we lack, we can maintain a more optimistic view of life.

Even if the original *Sefer Milhamot Hashem* is lost to us, its message remains very relevant to all generations. We are grateful for all the blessings we have received from God, Who has sustained us, and maintained us, and allowed us to reach this point in our lives.