

Word of the advancing Jewish nation has spread among the entire Middle East. Forty years earlier this band of slaves had been miraculously liberated from the totalitarian regime of Egypt and had been exposed to a spurt of Divine miracles. Though their entry to Israel had been significantly and tragically delayed, here they were at the gates of a land which carried a Divine promise. As military opposition to this march seemed futile, a renowned prophet named Bilam was requisitioned to hatch an alternate strategy. Where the sword will fail perhaps the tongue will succeed. A frontal attack may be pointless but a prophetic curse accompanied by a verbal assault may be more successful. Bilam the sorcerer is drafted by King Balak to identify and highlight our national flaws, and verbally smear us in an attempt to demoralize our spirit. Fortunately, God intervenes and scuttles Bilam's plans. His venom is converted to praise and his planned vitriol is replaced by some of the most remarkable blessings ever voiced about our people and our future. For centuries Jews have launched daily prayers by uttering Bilam's famous phrase : "Mah tovu ohalecha Ya'akov (how pleasant the tents of Jacob are) reminding us that we sometimes take our achievements for granted. It takes a conniving outsider who is, none the less inspired by Jewish families, to remind us of its vital importance to Jewish identity.

This strategy of "verbal libel" created a historical blueprint for assaulting the Jews. Recognizing the indomitability of the Jewish people our enemies often resorted to a secondary plan – verbal assaults aimed at sowing inner doubt and demoralizing our spirit. In the 12th century the Yemenite Jews were facing both a false "self-announced" Messiah as well as a violent Islamic Fundamentalist movement pressuring the Jews to convert to Islam. In particular, the Islamic Fundamentalist movement caused many to question the "chosen status" of the Jewish people. In a celebrated letter to the Jewish community, the

Rambam attempts to repair their depressed communal spirit by rebuilding their long-term faith. He cited the verse in Yeshaya perek 54 : “No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn” (Kol kli yutzar alayich lo yitzlach v’chol lashon takum itach lamishpat tarshiyi). Sensing a dual threat latent in this pasuk the Rambam reminded the community that, indeed, we are assailed by military weapons but we are also indicted by the tongues of our enemies. This verbal indictment was becoming ever more powerful and frequent as Christianity and Islam began to dominate the Medieval world as each religion aimed at converting heathen Jews to the “true religion”. To support their respective agendas they employed the might of the fist but also the sting of the tongue. Each impugned the Jews as a Divinely disdained nation who had forfeited their historical status and had been replaced by new religions which had been delivered by newly minted prophets. Jews were exposed to incessant harangues about the futility of their ancient and outdated ritual-saturated religion. God had already discarded the Jews and historical events certainly corroborated this abandonment. In his attempt to “strengthen weak hands and support wobbling knees” the Rambam reminded us that this blueprint or verbal assault had already been foreshadowed by Isiah who had promised that all attempts- both of sword and tongue- would be defeated. Throughout the next seven centuries Jews continued to be victimized by actual violence which threatened their lives and general well-being. Additionally, Jews were persecuted by verbal offensives attempting to break their spirit and their inner religious conviction . Our ability to withstand each challenge was instrumental in our survival amidst unlikely odds.

Our return to our homeland has caused the “reformulation” of this ancient struggle. Once again we face military threats and likewise, once again, tongues are raised to defame us and

discredit our mission. However, the content of this verbal onslaught has changed. Whereas it was once a “theological” barrage it is now a moral assault. For centuries our religious tenets were discredited; in this century our moral integrity is under fire. Our journey to return to our own homeland has been cast as an imperialist and unethical displacement of indigenous populations. Our attempts to protect ourselves against severe security risks have labeled us an apartheid nation.

Indeed our return to Israel has created many moral complications about settling a hotly contested land already populated by previous residents. These moral considerations should not be ignored or taken lightly. Our warrant to this land is as representatives of the Divine presence in this world. Our moral behavior and our ethical sensitivity are meant to reflect the moral essence of God. If we act morally indifferent we no longer fully represent Him and without that warrant we enjoy no title to the land of Israel. Without question, the immense struggle to defeat innumerable hostile enemies can potentially blur the moral codes which we are summoned to live by and build a society around. The acute challenges of security may demand the “flexing” of personal liberties and may compel us to encounter morally complex situations. External constructive criticism can always help us recalibrate our moral equilibrium and preserve our moral integrity.

However, given our desire to maintain our moral compass, it is difficult to ignore how disproportionately we are singled out for moral outrage and criminalization. Our enemies have “chummed” the international waters and have created a feeding frenzy of verbal hostility toward the lone democracy in the Middle East and the lone country in which, by and large, minority and gender rights are upheld- oftentimes at great cost to other cherished values. International bodies, meant uphold human rights and moral values, have become kangaroo courts,

ironically mocking the very rights they are meant to reinforce. Often, the outrage against the Jewish State has become a sad study in the psychopathic nature of “hatred of the other”. In its wild attempt to discredit Israel these bodies have abdicated all reasonable credibility and have compromised any hope of crusading on behalf of the supremely important values they were assembled to protect in the first place. Such is the devouring nature of hatred- it so engulfs balanced sensibilities that it becomes self-destructive. Hatred consumes the Hater ! IN Egypt, Pharo was so intoxicated with loathing of Jews that he was willing to expose his own child to material harm. We have no shortage of modern day Pharos. The scathing tongues of our enemies continue to assault the Jewish nation. Bilam began this scheme and, for thousands of years, the verbal discrediting of Jews was pivoted on religious grounds. Today it is the moral caliber of the Jewish State which is unfairly and viciously berated. Bilam’s voice still stalks us.

What happened before will happen again ! More than any Torah section Balak reminds us of the cyclical nature of human history and of the Jewish trajectory. We face a modern day Bilam whose verbal assaults have been launched in Parliaments across the globe, and in social media interactions across cyber space. “Bilam” has found new mountains upon which to stand, to gaze upon the Jewish nation and hurl inaccurate and hateful invective. We have withstood these barrages before and with God’s help we will continue to withstand them, as we carefully re-stich our national fabric in our land. Our path is rife with significant moral issues and we do best not to underestimate their complexity nor ignore balanced voices of informed critique. However we must internally reaffirm our conviction that we are a moral nation, driven by our historical moral code and the Divine moral example. By and large, we have performed a modern day

miracle of creating a morally sound democracy in a region surrounded by hostile neighbors bent upon our destruction. We have remained faithful to our moral roots and we yearn for the day in which our decency and rectitude are acknowledged by the international community.