From Out the Mouths of …

Spin, Propaganda, Lies

by

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From the beginning of time, half-truths, lies and falsehoods have been an effective weapon to soften, weaken and bring down nations and people. The slanders used against the Jewish people throughout the generations have been designed to limit us, demonize us, and destroy us.

They have always failed.

But each generation seems destined and determined to try anew.

In Biblical times, we learn of kings and nations falling by the wayside as the Children of Israel become a strong and viable nation. Amalek, the Emorites, the Canaanites and the King of Bashan were defeated, crushed. *Just as God had promised they would be*! Now, Moav felt the Lord’s might and Israel’s strength at its door.

Desperate, the King of Moav viewed the defeat of the other nations with ever growing alarm, realizing that conventional battle was not sufficient to slow the advance of the Hebrew nation. Like the others, he no doubt dismissed them as little more than a rabble of slaves, disorganized and weak. He had no inkling of the genuine power behind Israel’s advance. Now, with the nation imperiling his own, he tried to strategize. And, like so many others since, he decided to use a mouth piece (what we would call a “media expert” or “talking head”) to demean and diminish us.

Balak believed if only a world renowned spokesman would ascend to a large enough platform to “curse the nation that has gone out from Egypt and covered the face of the land,” that he might slow it, trivialize it, “soften it up” for a more conventional destruction.

His strategy sounds so familiar to our ears! From Bilaam to the United Nations, we have been cursed, lied about, slandered. Balak’s “public relations” strategy – to debase us as foreigners, intruders, aggressors, immigrants (not yet all-powerful money lenders and bankers!) – so that “public opinion” would render us ripe for destruction.

Rabbi Berel Wein calls Bilaam “Balak’s default weapon against Moshe and Israel.”

Crazy, right?

If only.

Bilaam, accepting Balak’s invitation became the model for all those who would rise after him. But that… that’s ancient history now. There is no need to mine the mounds of history for examples of this strategy. We have contemporary examples everywhere we turn. Cable, network, print media – we live in an “age of Bilaam”.

What is their message that they bray over and over and over again? That we Jews “have no relationship to Jerusalem” – does the Psalm not express that relationship more passionately than any lover? If ever I forget thee…

With *somber* and *serious* expressions, they say Jews never lived in these “territories”. Samaria and Judea notwithstanding, I suppose.

They blather that the Temple Mount has always been in Moslem hands and that Israelis are murdering innocent Arabs! No mention, of course, that these “innocent Arabs” had just recently stabbed Hadas, our border policewoman and killed her.

Our modern day Bilaams multiply over and over. They go by famous names and titles. The European Union. The United Nations. The United Nations Human Rights Commission, NGO’s, academics… on and on and on. That they are eloquent and “thoughtful” is beyond dispute. But so too the first Bilaam, whose prose and poetry remains unmatched by these deceitful charlatans.

Bilaam.

“Let us turn now to our Mideast Expert…”

Bilaam.

A talking head.

An empty suit.

A deceiver. A liar.

Balak knew the talking head he wanted. He dispatched messengers for him. “And he sent messengers to Bilaam son of Beor.”

Bilaam asked for some time to consider the king’s request. During the night, he asked God’s direction. The answer was clear. “Do not go with them; do not curse the people, for they are Blessed. (22:12)

Bilaam advised the messengers of God’s response. This is not a people you can simply demonize. They are blessed; they are eternal.

Balak will not take “no” for an answer. He will speak to Bilaam’s agent. Increase the offer. After all, everyone has a price, no?

Still Bilaam resisted. “Even if Balak will give me his entire treasury filled with silver and gold, my hands are tied – I can only do that which God permits me to do.”

Once again, they remain overnight to hear God’s response. This time, God’s response surprises Bilaam. “If these men are coming for your advantage (likra lecha), then go with them, just only speak that which I tell you. (22:20)

What? Has God changed His mind?

Im likra lecha – Rashi teaches that God is saying that if you believe this invitation is ‘lecha’- to your advantage then go but on the condition that he say only that which God allows him to say. Ibn Ezra adds to our understanding by pointing out that God often responds to the entreaties of people by allowing them to do things of which He does not approve, just as He did the *Meraglim*. You want to go? Go. No need to but if you insist…

Bilaam, despite his feigned resistance, is eager to go. You want to go? Go. There’s no reason to, but if you insist… As Ramban notes in a well-known maxim, “they lead a person on the path he wishes to travel.”   *Gei ge’zunthe’reit*. Knock yourself out.

Everyone has a price. And Bilaam had his.

Rabbi Frand cites Rav Shimon Schwab in saying that one of the most potent forces in the world is doing something *lishma* – forits own sake, free of ulterior motive. As soon as money, prestige, power, honor – anything that sullies the “rightness” of the action – the action itself is demeaned. It loses its power and potency.

We are enjoined to learn Torah *lishma*,for its own sake. In doing so, we come closer to the Revealer of Torah. When we learn for money or self-aggrandizement, our learning is diminished. We do *mitzvoth lishma* in order to incorporate God’s ways into our very being. When we perform *mitzvoth* because of peer pressure our action is demeaned.

This is the message God is delivering to Bilaam. When Balak came to ask that you “curse the Jews” without any side shows, no money, no fee, no recognition, Bilaam was ready to go for no other reason than because he hated Jews. He was ready to accept the invitation because “we have to curse Jews”. Such a man speaks from a cause. So God said, Don’t go. God knows that such a man, driven by *lishma* is genuinely dangerous. But, when Balak offers honor and *gelt*, then God shrugs. Do what you want.

You are no longer dangerous. You are just another prostitute.

The narrative of Balak and Bilaam teaches us, more than anything else, the power of *lishma*. Authenticity, honesty, integrity have allowed the Jewish people to withstand the lies of generations. With God’s help, we withstood Balak and Bilaam. With God’s help, we will continue to withstand the talking heads and the fog of “alternative facts” and lies.