



Parashat Balak

The Blind Spot

-Rabbi Uri Fish-

Our parasha, parashat Balak, presents us with the only external perspective on the people of Israel as they wandered through the desert. Until this parasha, we have only been privy to the events that occurred in the desert through Moshe's eyes, while in this parasha the events are presented to us through the eyes of Balak and Balaam.

The final pasuk in the Torah states as follows: "And there was no other prophet who arose in Israel like Moses, whom Hashem knew face to face" (Devarim 34:10). In reference to this pasuk, the Sages in the midrash add the following, somewhat surprising, statement: "There did not arise one in Israel, but among the nations there did arise one, and it was Balaam. Furthermore, there are three ways in which Balaam was greater than Moshe" (Midrash Aggadah Bamidbar Chapter 24).

The magnitude of Balaam's prophetic abilities is evident through his words, in which he describes the greatness of the people of Israel in ways and in terms that Moshe himself did not utilize and potentially did not even recognize. While in the previous parasha Moshe chastises the people for their weakness and exclaims: "Now listen, you rebels!" (Bamidbar 20:10), Balaam in this week's parasha cannot hold back his praise for the Jewish people: "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!" (Bamidbar 24:5). What, then, allowed Balaam to recognize positives about the people that Moshe himself could not, and what does this teach us about leadership?

I suggest that we may compare the difference between Moshe and Balaam to the difference between two people who notice a child approaching a cliff overhanging a lake. One of those people is the child's father, while the other is a psychopath. The child's father would react by running to save the child from falling over the cliff, even at the expense of hurting the child by restraining him. On the other hand, the psychopath sees the child approaching danger and all he can say to himself, in something of a calm curiousness, is: 'it would be interesting to see what would happen if he fell; would he be able to swim?' Paradoxically, sometimes it is the latter person, the one who has no emotional connection to the child, who can better identify the potential within the child, while the father, who is emotionally bound to the child, is blinded by his worry and care.

Wilfred Bion, one of the great psychoanalysts of the twentieth century, argued that in order to help someone it is sometimes necessary to approach that person while "eschewing desire and memory." An emotional bond can often skew our perspective or cause things to appear different from how they are in reality, and thus mask weakness and imperfection, or alternatively hide capability and reduce positive potential.



ארגון רבני צהר



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It would appear that this was Balaam's contribution to Moshe's leadership. Balaam's emotional and philosophical distance from the Jewish people allowed him to observe things that Moshe could not. Moshe was a fatherly leader. He was full of passion for the people and thus also full of expectation and disappointment whenever he was confronted with their failings. This form of leadership is invaluable, but it also carries with it the risk of failing to identify both weakness and strength. Balaam faced the people without either memory or desire and thus was able to perceive things from a broader perspective. The conclusion from this analysis is that it is unusual for a leader to be able to be both fatherly and distant. For this reason, it is important for a fatherly leader to link himself to another person who can take something of a more distant and objective view on the environment and thus enhance the overall picture.

It is possible that this is precisely what Moshe wanted to achieve when he asked his father in law to remain with the people rather than return to Midian: "We are traveling to the place about which Hashem said, I will give it to you. Come with us and we will be good to you ..." (Bamidbar 10:29). After Hovav (Yitro) refused this appointment and returned home, the Torah was forced to insert the prophecy related by Balaam in order to fill the "blind spot" in Moshe leadership, who, because of his greatness and passion, was unable to perceive the picture in its entirety.

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