

Echoes of Eden

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Parashat Balak 5774 Reading Anti-Semites

Parashat Balak begins with a peek into a world that both attracts and repulses us; it is a conversation among anti-Semites regarding the Jewish Problem. This conversation interests us because, on some level, we want to know what others are saying about our people – even to the point of an obsession that entralls and overwhelms our own self-awareness. On the other hand, we find the stereotypes and animus abhorrent. Anyone who has ever overheard or participated in a conversation regarding the Jews in which the interlocutors are unaware that one of the participants is Jewish, has experienced this strange feeling.

The perceptions of those who hate us are encapsulated in a beautiful but painful joke, which has certainly known many renditions and incarnations. The following is a version set in Nazi Germany:

**When ... read Der
Stürmer, I see so much
more: that the Jews
control all the banks,
that we dominate in the
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the verge of taking over
the entire world. You
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a whole lot better!"**

Rabbi Altmann and his secretary were sitting in a coffeehouse in Berlin in 1935. "Herr Altmann," said his secretary, "I notice you're reading Der Stürmer! I can't understand why. A Nazi libel sheet! Are you some kind of masochist, or, God forbid, a self-hating Jew?"

"On the contrary, Frau Epstein. When I used to read the Jewish papers, all I learned about were pogroms, riots in Palestine, and assimilation in America. But now that I read Der Stürmer, I see so much more: that the Jews control all the banks, that we dominate in the arts, and that we're on the verge of taking over the entire world. You know – it makes me feel a whole lot better!"

This basic idea is not only true, but as old as the Book of Bamidbar. Parashat Balak begins with a description of the overall climate of those times:

The Moavites became petrified because the [Israelite] People were so numerous. They were disgusted by the Israelites... (Bamidbar 22:3)

Here are two common elements: There are “so many” Jews, and they are “disgusting.” The Moavites’ description of the Jews is telling:

Moav said to the elders of Midian, 'Now the [Israelite] community will lick up everything around us, just as a bull licks up all the vegetation in the field.' (ibid.)

The first step is, and always has been, the dehumanization of the Jews; they are compared to an animal. But the second step is the particular choice of metaphor. In this case, they are likened to a powerful, destructive animal – a bull. This description is even more striking when we recall that earlier in the Book of Bamidbar, when the scouts returned from their mission to explore the Promised Land, they made a fascinating comment:

While we were there, we saw the titans. They were sons of the giants, descendants of titans. We felt in our own eyes like tiny grasshoppers. And so we were in their eyes. (Bamidbar 13:33)

It is perfectly legitimate to describe one’s adversary through the use of images or allegory, especially when the adversary seems particularly unusual and powerful. Similarly, it is perfectly acceptable to describe your own feelings – what it felt like to be in the proximity of this adversary. What is not legitimate is to project your own perception onto others, to decide how your adversary perceives you. The spies contended that they knew how the residents of the land saw them: “We were like grasshoppers in their eyes.” Conversely, Moav sees the Jews not as grasshoppers, but “as a powerful bull swallowing up the field.”

Here, then, is the difference between the assessment of current events found in Jewish newspapers, as opposed to that found in the news outlets of our enemies: We project our own weakness in their eyes, while they see our power.

A second element can be discerned from Bil'am's famous words:

How good are your tents Yaakov, the dwelling places of Israel. (Bamidbar 24:5)

Bil'am sees a large camp that is unified. The commentaries on this verse explain that when Bil'am saw the layout of the camp, he saw something remarkable: The doors and windows of the tents did not face one another. He saw that the Israelites had achieved unity, but not at the price of enforced uniformity. He saw a large nation that worked toward achieving its goals as one body politic, yet each individual within the camp retained their right to privacy, personal autonomy and dignity. Even more remarkable is the fact that this is the camp of the Jews. The Torah does not whitewash or omit the many internecine struggles, revolts and transgressions that this camp had already survived. And yet, despite all of our perceived differences, the outsider sees us as a unified nation living in harmony and moving forward in solidarity.

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Today, our own newspapers are full of the language of disunity and despair: internecine conflict between different segments of our own nation based on differences between warring communities that are so minute as to be imperceptible to outside observers. Even worse, like the spies in the desert, we continue to project our own insecurities onto others, and fail to see our greatness. We assume that we know how others see us, and fail to see ourselves as we truly are – or as others see us.

Sometimes the best medicine for the Jews is to see the newspapers of those who hate us. It is there that we can read about our power as it perceived by others. It is there that we can be bolstered by the unity others ascribe to us. At the very least, by reading those newspapers, we will be reminded that we face common threats, and that the best way to fight these threats is look past our

own small differences, and to utilize our power – the power we often forget we possess.

For a more in-depth analysis see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2014/06/audio-and-essays-parashat-balak.html>