

An opportunist consolidates power by exploiting the xenophobic fears of his countrymen.

Nope, it's not a headline from this week's news – well, it might be . . . but it's also the opening of Parashat Balak, at least if we read between the lines.

The first line of the parashah, in numbers 22, verse 2, says that Balak, son of Tzipor, saw what the Israelites had done - i.e. how they had defeated their enemies. The next verse says, "Moab was alarmed because that people was so numerous. Moab dreaded the Israelites," and so in the following verse, Moab bands together , and it says that Balak, son of Tzipor, who was king of Moab at the time, sent a messenger to the prophet Balam, asking him to curse the Israelites.

I'll get to what happens with the curse in a little while, but first: Balak is introduced without a title. It's only in the third verse of the parasha, after the people are terrified, that Balak is referred to as king. As Midrash Tanchuma teaches, Balak was just one of many princes, but he became king because at the time the people felt a desperate need for one, because they were terrified by the Israelites.

But this parashah is not just teaching that fear of foreigners can cause a people to turn to authoritarian leadership. Indeed, if all Torah could is confirm what is already blatantly evident about reality, that would be depressing, indeed.

But this parashah has a great deal to say about the ups and downs on the journey to justice, to compassion, on the journey between curse and blessing.

Balak hires Bilaam, a mercenary prophet, who is willing to do anything to make a profit – to curse the Israelites. Bilaam is willing to brush aside God’s direct warnings not to even try to curse the Israelites, and winds up literally pushed up against a wall by his own donkey, whom he almost beats to death before the donkey opens her mouth and talks back to him and an angel uncovers his eyes and sternly makes him understand that there will be no cursing unless God says so. Madeline Ronit will speak tomorrow a little more about what we learn from Balaam’s encounter with the donkey and the angel.

But onward: Once they reach the Israelite camp, three times does Balaam build altars, four times opens his mouth to curse. What comes out of his mouth are not curses. They are complex lines of poetry, including the third time, when he says the line with which we open our mourning services, “Ma tovu ohalecha Ya’akov, mishkenotecha, Yisrael.” How good are your tents, oh Jacob, your dwelling places, oh Israel.”

We often stop telling the story at this happy ending, but the parashah doesn’t end there. Alas, the Israelites then screw up their behavior - as we often do – in this case tempted by the very Moabites who sought to destroy them unsuccessfully at the beginning of the parashah. God retaliates with a plague that kills thousands and that is where the parashah ends.

We could say this shows that the blessing of an enemy prophet is meaningless. Many sages have concluded that, including Abravanel, who wrote, “Why did God prevent God from cursing the Israelites? Why should they have cared about his curse, as long as Hashem blessed them with peace?”

The reasons that many sages agree upon for God forcing the blessings from Bilaam's mouth are more psychological: the it was to humble Bilaam's arrogance, or that it was to terrify the surrounding nations, who would here that their most powerful prophet's efforts had been confounded – or even – that it was to comfort Israel, who would know that they were blessed even by the enemy.

I would actually argue that the blessing itself was powerful, but not in the way the Israelites understood. And Balak and Bilaam might have been more successful than they realized. Perhaps Bilaam should have received the paycheck that Balak promised, after all.

Because blessings are aspirational. When I try to bless us all with peace, it is not a claim that we are at peace, but an intention towards peace. If we misunderstand blessings, if we confuse aspirations with reality, then blessings become curses.

Perhaps that's what's happening here. The Israelites, thinking they were blessed, became prone to misbehavior because they trusted too much in their, shall we say, exceptionalism. But words of blessing are not enough. In order for blessings to flourish, one must actually behave in a way that invites blessing, and not behave in the same ways as those who seek to spread curses.

So for the moment we are currently enduring, Parashat Balak reflects how much more important actions are than words. And in this moment in society, when we are faced with a tyrant who is using fear to consolidate his power, who may successful undo the checks and balances upon which democracy depends, raising our voices in protest might not be enough – just as Bilaam's articulations were not enough for Israel to actually be blessed.

Now is the time for us to start asking ourselves what action we can take, what ways we are willing to put our bodies and time and money on the line, how much safety and comfort we are willing to risk – in order to preserve decency, democracy, humanity and the possibility of a blessing.

But even more than that, what the parashah reminds me is that there are no happy endings. But not because there are only bad endings; rather because there are *no endings* – the story doesn't fold itself up nicely and close down. Or as Rebecca Solnit wrote in *Hope in the Dark*, "history is like weather, not like checkers. A game of checkers ends. The weather never does." She also writes that activists who hope to be able to achieve a world in which it is safe for them to retire from activism are delusional. The Ma tovu blessing is not the end of the story. Neither is the plague. The Israelites will recover as a community, and go on to experience further curses and blessings, inherit their homeland, be exiled, return, exile return – the story is still being written today, and we are the ink, the quill and the paper.

The struggle for justice in our times is like the struggle for blessing for the Israelites. It is aspirational. There will be times when it looks very far away, and there will be times when we feel close to achieving it, and perhaps the latter are even more dangerous than the former, for the complacency they cause. In either case, the worst thing we can do is assume that the story is over.

Rabbi Toba Spitzer wrote today: “Curses and blessings ultimately issue from the same place: the human heart, the human mind, the human voice. An American government set on exacerbating hatred and division, on closing our borders in a misguided attempt to bolster the people within, on demonizing large segments of our population as well as the foundations of our democracy, has stirred up a powerful and potent response. We are now seeing – and responding to – policies and prejudices that were in place long before 2017. New coalitions are forming, thousands of new people running for elected office, a young generation waking up to its power. Something important is happening, even as we mourn all that is going wrong.”

We do not know how the “something important” will take shape, what it will energize, but we must understand ourselves to be active agents in the story – not just recipients of curse or blessing, but the ones who together will determine how the curses and blessings unfold.

As Alynda Segarra sings, “Pa’lante.” Onward, friends.