WHY WAS BALAK WORRIED?

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

> *"And Balak saw..." (22:2)*

Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech Hertzberg writes: In this parsha, we see the vast chasm between what some might call the "natural" outlook of man, and that which the Torah expects of a spiritual individual. Balak saw the great Nation of Israel, and what he saw aroused within him hatred and jealousy, a desire to curse and murder them. The Torah outlook accepts jealousy only within the context of "the jealousy of scribes increases wisdom" - by seeing the accomplishments of others, one desires to learn more himself. [Even in that case, of course, the Torah condemns one who uses his scholarship to put down others.]

Balak should have known that Israel would not harm him, because they had been commanded not to interfere with his nation (Moab). Nonetheless, Balak saw Israel's victory over Sichon and Og, and he worried. Why?

The answer is that Balak was a militaristic ruler, living and interacting with other militaristic rulers in a society that was essentially devoid of what we understand to be moral values. In his world, a mighty nation simply ran from one victory to the next, and would not stop unless beaten back. No nation emerging from a successful campaign against Sichon and Og would lay down its weapons when facing Moab. Balak was afraid, because he could not comprehend the idea of a nation that would refuse to wage war merely because someone (even G-d) told them to stop. [To the extent that we see national leaders no longer behaving in this fashion, it is evidence of the extent to which Jewish values have spread, directly and via Christianity and Islam.]

Another example of differences in outlook: Rashi quotes a Midrash regarding the verse, "Bilaam arose early in the morning, and saddled his donkey." (22:21) The Midrash says that G-d spoke concerning Bilaam: "Wicked one! Their forefather Avraham preceeded you, as it says 'And Avraham arose early in the morning, and saddled his donkey.'" (Breishis 22:3 [Akeidas Yitzchak - the sacrifice of Isaac])

Again, the difference between the two is without limit. Bilaam arose early in order to run after his desires for wealth and glory, and his donkey was a tool to help him realize those desires, to destroy his imagined enemies and to build on the downfall of others. Avraham, on the other hand, arose

early in order to sacrifice that which he held most dear.

For those who know Hebrew, the word for "saddled", "yachvosh", sounds much like the verb "to conquer". The word for "donkey" used in Breishis regarding Avraham is "chamor", which is related to the word for the physical - "chomer." Avraham arose early, and conquered his desires in service of G-d - conquering those same desires which Bilaam arose early in order to satisfy.

The Jewish Nation described in the Bible is not one that desires to rule the world, or to take that which is not theirs. Those who look only at the cases where G-d commanded conquest and use them to accuse Israel of being itself a militaristic nation, ignore the many cases where G-d ordered Israel to live in peace and not attack another nation - even though it was clearly within their power to do so.

The Torah tells us that our ultimate goals must not be material wealth, glory or honor - and certainly not ill-gotten gain. Rather, we are asked to deliberately put aside our own desires, in order to better pursue our spiritual destiny.

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The author is the Director of Project Genesis.