

CRIMINALS, DRUG-ADDICTS, AND FOOD THIEVES

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Balak...saw all that Yisrael had done to the Emori. Moav became frightened of the people, because it was numerous...Moav said to the elders of Midian, "Now the congregation will lick up our entire surroundings."...Balak ...was king of Moav at that time.

Balak saw? From his palace window? Should it not have stated that he heard?

What was his real fear? The conventional answer is that he learned of the victory of the Bnei Yisrael over the powerful Emori. That is not very satisfactory. He could have discerned in that decisive victory that he was safe. For why had the Bnei Yisrael targeted the Emori, and not even hinted at an attack on Moav? Isn't it likely that he realized that Moav was not going to be a target – and might even have heard that Hashem Himself had commanded that they be left alone?

If the battlefield record of the Bnei Yisrael concerned Balak – if he failed to realize that there was a hands-off policy directed towards Moav – wouldn't the miraculous stories of the Exodus and the splitting of the Reed Sea be a greater cause for concern?

Balak saw – and Moav became frightened? Whoever saw should have been the one who was frightened! Was their fear limited to the Bnei Yisrael licking up their surroundings? Didn't they mean that they were fearful of getting killed?

Finally, what does the Torah wish to tell us with "Balak...was king of Moav at that time?" Even if we assume, as Rashi does, that Balak ascended the throne for the very purpose of dealing with the Jewish threat, why do we find out only at the end of the introduction that Balak's kingship was a stopgap measure? That is a helpful clue in processing the entire story, and it would seem appropriate to let us know that up front, before the Moav-Midian negotiations began!

The key to the *parshah* may be illegal immigration.

War creates refugees. People flee the battle areas, and the wider area in which safety and security are compromised, and the food supply is disrupted. So it was with the defeat of the Emori. People fled destroyed areas, especially in the face of the take-no-prisoners conduct of that battle. We can assume that substantial numbers migrated to Moav and Midian in search of a stable place to live. The influx of refugees threatened the host food supplies. The feared people here are not the Bnei Yisrael. It was known that they had no plans to attack. It was the refugees who were the "numerous people" who seemed poised to overwhelm Moav and Midian – who would "lick up" their "entire

surroundings." They are also called a "congregation," because they came from many parts of Emori territory, and gathered together in a smaller number of places in Moav.

Balak was among those who fled. He had been there. He "saw all that Yisrael had done to the Emori," and resolved to escape to Moav. He did well for himself there, and soon became a temporary leader. He did not turn his back on his many countrymen who also fled there, and refused to deport them. As the head of state, he was relatively protected from the ill effects they would bring to Moav. He was not going to starve!

The people were a different matter. They were not willing to suffer the effects of the influx of aliens. That is why it is the people – "Moav," and not Balak – who are described as afraid. It is the people – not Balak – who reached out to Midian.

Balak is forced to get involved on their behalf. In time, he is asked pointedly and directly why he does not expel the recent arrivals fleeing the scourge of war. The Torah tells us at this point that he was king of Moav "at that time." He himself was a recent arrival who quickly rose to the top. But he could not forget his roots. He stood his ground, and refused to harm the refugees. He sought a different way to deal with the problem by inducing them to leave voluntarily.

It is not known if he tried to build a wall to keep out new arrivals.

1. Based on Meleches Machsheves, Balak, by R. Moshe Cheifetz 1663-1711 .