

A LOCAL CALL

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

"Balak, the son of Tzipor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. Moav was very afraid; there were many of them, and Moav became very uneasy about the Children of Israel." (Bamidbar 22:2-3)

Parashat Balak is a parshah about Hashgachah Pratit — Divine Providence. It is one of the only parshiot in which the Jewish people are not directly involved. Instead, G-d fights their battle for them from behind the scenes, while the Jewish people seem oblivious to the war being waged on their behalf. Even if Moshe Rabbeinu was aware of what was happening, and it was more than likely that he was, he did not get involved in any way that we can see from the parshah itself.

"Behold, He does not slumber nor sleep, the Guardian of Israel." (Tehillim 121:4)

Of course He doesn't sleep. Why would G-d need to sleep? What it means is that He never stops paying attention to the Jewish people and what they are going through, even though it may look as if He does. For example, it says:

"Eventually the king of Egypt died. By that time, the Children of Israel were broken because of the servitude, and they cried. Their cry for help came to G-d, who heard their groaning. G-d remembered His covenant with Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov, and saw the Children of Israel. G-d was aware of their suffering." (Shemot 2:23:25)

This seems to contradict the previous verse from Tehillim. Fine, so G-d wasn't slumbering nor was He sleeping, but what was He doing instead that He was unaware, for a time, of the suffering of His children in Egypt? Until they screamed out and caught G-d's attention, had He been aware of what they were going through?

Obviously yes. Not only was G-d aware of the suffering of the Jewish people in Egypt, He was behind it. After all, could an Egyptian lift a finger to do anything if G-d didn't first give him the energy to do it? If an Egyptian thought something, could he have hidden that thought from G-d? If an enemy conspires against the Jewish people, does G-d not know about it instantly?

"He Who forms their hearts together, Who comprehends all their deeds." (Tehillim 33:15)

The trouble is the way things appear to us, and our expectations. For example, take the story of Lot and his daughters, a very troubling one indeed. For, one would expect the lineage of Moshiach Ben Dovid to be immaculate, without any blemish along the way. And yet, when one considers the origin

of Ruth, the ancestress of Dovid HaMelech, descending from Moav, the child of a father-daughter relationship, the lineage of the source of Jewish kings and the ultimate redeemer of the Jewish people, is about as murky as it can get in this world.

That's the way it appears to us, and it is nothing what we would expect from G-d. Therefore, most just side-step the issue and let history do its thing, trusting that one day in the future, it will all make sense. However, let's try a different tact. Let's make one very justifiable assumption, and that is, no matter how crooked history may APPEAR TO US, let's assume that G-d is as straight as anything comes, and that everything He does must be, by definition, pure. Let that be our absolute, and let's apply it to the story of Lot and his daughters. How can we re- paint the story in such a way, in spite of all the assumptions of everyone at that time and also now, that all was really kosher after all, GLATT kosher.

SHABBAT DAY:

"Lot looked and saw the whole plain of the Jordan, and how it was well watered (this was before G-d destroyed S'dom and Amarah), like a garden of G-d, like the land of Egypt was as you come to Tzoar. Lot chose the whole plain of the Jordan for himself, and journeyed eastward. Thus they separated from one another. Avram lived in the land of Canaan; Lot lived in the cities of the plain, and camped by So'dom. The men of Sodom were evil, and transgressed greatly against G-d." (Bereishit 13:10-13)

Amazingly, in spite of the fact that he had lived with his uncle for so long, the righteous Avraham Avinu, Lot chose S'dom to live in of all places. As the Torah testifies, the people of S'dom were evil and transgressed greatly against G-d.

Nevertheless, Lot took a wife from the women of S'dom and built a family with her, from whom he had daughters. Now, even though the concept of marriage did not apply at that time, and that technically-speaking his wife was not married to him in the Torah sense, he still would have been the biological father of the woman's children, making intimacy with his daughters an act of incest, forbidden according to the Seven Noachide Laws, and not good for the ancestor of Moshiach.

However, let us not forget two things. First of all, all that G-d does is righteous and pure, and secondly, all that the people of S'dom did was not. Given the nature of the people from whom Lot's wife was taken, was it not possible for the mother of Moav to have been a child from Lot's wife, fathered by another man in secret? Perhaps Lot's wife had fooled her husband, and therefore the night that Lot became drunk and was intimate with the young woman whom he had thought was his daughter, was a woman who was actually permitted to him according to the Seven Noachide Laws. Why all the confusion? Because, as the Alschich explains, the main goal here was to redeem the spark of Dovid HaMelech, which had been hidden deep down within the Klipot, represented by the people of S'dom. However, it had to be done in such a way that would not arouse the suspicion of the Sitra Achra, against whose interest such a redemption was. Thus, G- d "required" a scenario that fooled the Sitra Achra into letting events occur as they did, while at the same time remaining true to

the purity of G-d's actions.

Or, maybe one of the babies was switched either accidentally or purposely in the baby ward of the hospital, unbeknownst to Lot or his wife. Who knows what the real story is? All we know for sure is that G-d was involved every step along the way, working at all times behind the scenes, perhaps at times out in the open, but ALWAYS orchestrating events to satisfy all the needs of history, and particularly those of the Jewish people. This is true in every aspect of Jewish history, the parts we celebrate and the parts we mourn. That is why the Talmud says:

"A person is obligated to bless G-d for the bad as he blesses Him for the good." (Brochot 54a)

If He is not involved with the bad events of history, then why bless Him at all? Rather, He is involved, and instead it says:

"Rav Huna said in the name of Rav, citing Rebi Meir, and so it was taught in the name of Rebi Akiva: 'A man should always accustom himself to say, 'Whatever the All-Merciful does is for good'." (Ibid.)

This means that, as convoluted as history may seem at times, and as backwards as the events of our lives may appear to us, we have to know, or at least believe that when all the layers of the events are stripped away, it will all make sense to us as well. And not just make sense, but even appear to us as straight and pure as events can get, and had we judged G-d to the side of merit, perhaps we could have seen this at the time as well. Maybe this is part of the message of the following account:

Our Rabbis taught: The scholars were once in need of something from a noblewoman where all the great men of Rome were to be found. They asked, "Who will go?" "I will go," Rebi Yehoshua said. So Rebi Yehoshua and his students went. When he reached the door of her house, he removed his Tefillin at a distance of four amot, entered, and shut the door in front of them. After he came out he descended, went to the mikvah, and learned with his students. He asked them, "When I removed my tefillin, of what did you suspect me?"

"We thought that our teacher reasoned, 'Let not sacred words enter a place of uncleanness'."

"When I shut [the door], of what did you suspect me?"

"We thought, perhaps he has [to discuss] an affair of State with her."

"When I descended to the mikvah, of what did you suspect me?"

"We thought, perhaps some spit spurted from her mouth upon the rabbi's clothing."

"By the [Temple] Service!" he exclaimed to them, "it was just like that. Just as you judged me favorably, so may G-d judge you favorably." (Shabbat 127b)

To do that, they had to really know their rebi well, and to believe, without exception, that he was truly a G-d-fearing man. With a starting point like that, all they had to do was use their imagination to devise a scheme that matched the circumstances and the character of their teacher, as far-fetched

as it may have seemed.

If we can do it for man, we must also be able to do it for G-d as well, Who is far more righteous than the most righteous of men.

SEUDAT SHLISHIT:

"G-d told Moshe, 'After you lie with your fathers, this people will act immorally and pursue the gods of the strangers of the land they are going to. They will abandon Me, and nullify My covenant which I have made with them. I will become very angry at them on that day, and I will abandon them and hide My face from them. They will be devoured, and plagued by many evils that will distress them, and will say, "Do we not suffer because G-d has left us?"'" (Devarim 31:16-17).

Let's say that a father wanted to test his sons' loyalty before giving over the reigns of his company to them upon retirement. Therefore, he devises a little test, whereby he pretends to travel abroad to watch what his sons will do while he is away. As the expression goes, "When the cat is away the mice will play." Are his sons some of those mice?

The father stages everything perfectly. He has a taxi pick him up to take him to the airport. He has what looks like a real plane ticket, and he packed suitcases as if he is really going away. As the father drives off, and his wife and sons wave good-bye to him, he has the taxi go around the block and drop him off at a neighbor's house, where he plans to stay for the week.

As the sons walk back to the house, they speak about the opportunity of being alone for a week without the "boss." However, whereas some talk about taking on even more responsibility to make sure that the company runs smoothly while their father is away, others talk about taking advantage of privileges reserved usually for the boss himself. A disagreement ensues, and each one goes his own way.

In the meantime, after a reasonable amount of time, the father pretends to call home from his destination overseas, and the sons have no reason to expect otherwise. One-by-one, the father questions each son about his activities, and checks to see how each responds to the father's apparent absence. They have no idea that their father can see them come and go, and actually watch them at work through a two-way mirror.

After the week is up, the father pretends to come home from his trip, and asks his sons about how the week was while he was gone. He listens intently as each one describes how he acted responsibly on behalf of the father, doing that which he thought was necessary to keep the company up to snuff.

Then comes the bombshell: the father reveals the truth.

At first there is disbelief, until the father tells them all that he saw, and how he saw it. He apologizes for the charade, but he explains how it was necessary to be able to know who to trust with his multi-

million dollar company, and who not to trust. Instantly, some of the sons feel tremendous relief knowing that their actions were admirable, as the father points out. Other sons feel embarrassed and exposed as they recall what their father must have seen them do at times when they thought that no one could see anything. Their dreams of taking over the family company one day are dashed.

Hester panim, the hiding of G-d's face, is exactly that: a hiding. Hiding does not imply an actual departure, it signifies invisibility, a perception, or rather, a misperception. It takes advantage of our assumptions and expectations to fool us into believing that whatever we seek is not there. However, as the prophet said:

"Seek out G-d and call to Him since He is close." (Yeshayahu 55:6)

Close, but hidden. However, something far away cannot be revealed like something that is close and only hidden. And, the prophet says that revelation depends upon us, on our desire to find Him. As it turns out, this is really the definition of a Jew, as the Akeidah has taught us.

MELAVE MALKAH:

"Avraham told the men, 'You stay here with the donkey, while I and the lad will walk until there, prostrate ourselves and then return to you.'" (Bereishit 22:5)

The Torah recounts that G-d told Avraham regarding his son Yitzchak:

"Go to the land of Moriah; bring him up there as an offering, upon one of the mountains which I will show you." (Bereishit 22:2)

Obediently, Avraham left for the land of Moriah with no specific indication of where he was to offer Yitzchak up to G-d; that information was to be revealed to him at a later time. Sure enough, on the third day of his journey, Avraham "lifted up his eyes" and saw the Divine sign: a mountain encompassed with fire from Heaven to earth, and the Clouds of Glory hovering above it (Bereishit Rabbah 56:2).

The Midrash says that, at that time, Avraham was uncertain as to who was to accompany him up to the mountain. Aside from Yitzchak, Avraham had brought along Yishmael, his son from Hagar, and Eliezer his trusted servant. Perhaps even Yitzchak was unworthy to complete the journey to Mount Moriah, the future location of both Temples. Therefore, Avraham tested each of them: anyone who saw the Divine Presence in the distance, he rightly assumed, was meant to travel with him up the mountain. In the end, only Yitzchak shared Avraham's vision, and therefore it says:

"Avraham told the men, 'You stay here — poh: Peh-Heh, with the donkey, while I and the lad will walk until there — koh: Chof-Heh, prostrate ourselves and then return to you.'" (Bereishit 22:5)

Fascinatingly, in Gematria Kollal (one is added for each word of the gematria), the numerical value of the word "poh" — here, is 86: 80+5+1, and of "koh" — there, is 26: 20+5+1. The numerical value of G-d's Name, "Elokim" — the Name of G-d when He works through nature, is also 86: 1+30+5+10+40, and the

numerical value of the Ineffable Name of G-d is 26: 10+5+6+5 — the Name of G-d when He works supernaturally.

Thus, on a simple level, Avraham had simply given instructions to Yishmael and Eliezer to remain behind with the donkey. However, on a deeper level the verse and the usage of the word "koh" alluded to a revelation of the Divine Presence and the light of Creation. It also represented an important fork in the spiritual road between Avraham and the rest of the nations of the world, the former being able to see the hand of G-d working "behind the scenes" of history, as in this week's parshah, and the latter being unable to do so.

Thus, as history now takes weird turns, and truth seems to be a distant concept, it seems as if the "Boss" has gone "abroad". In fact, it is only a charade. For, He neither slumbers nor sleeps when it comes to Jewish history, no matter how much it seems as if He does. He's just testing us, checking each one of us to determine who is reliable enough to run His business, so-to-speak, and who is not.

And, one of the things about being G-d is that He can do whatever it takes to convince us that we are truly on our own, even when He is right there next to us, watching us perform the mitzvah or, G-d forbid, the sin. When it comes to G-d, seeing is not always believing, and often, it is the other way around, though it is the intention of the Balaks and Bilaams throughout history to make us believe otherwise. Unfortunately, so it is for billions of Jews over the millennia, and with a lot of success.

"Seek out G-d and call to Him since He is close." (Yeshayahu 55:6)

It is only man who actually goes away, and makes the distance between G-d and himself so great.

Have a great Shabbat,
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Text

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