



Balak: The Power of the Spoken Word

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

"Sticks and stone may break my bones but words will never harm me." While the authorship of this statement is subject to dispute, it is clear that it is unequivocally false. Yes, sticks and stone can most definitely break bones, but words can harm and leave lasting scars.

Over the last number of weeks the Torah has tried to teach us the power of words. Almost a month ago we read the story of the *meraglim* (spies) who derailed our national dream of entering the Land of Israel through their slanderous speech. Words destroyed the dreams and aspirations of an entire nation. We then went on to read of the rebellion of Korach. Korach, angered that he did not receive a coveted position of leadership, ferments a rebellion against the leadership of Moshe and Aharon. Through words he turns 250 men and their families against God and His chosen ones. The end is catastrophic; the earth opens up and swallows the men and their families. Words caused the death of so many. Last, we read of the mistake of Moshe at *Mei Merivah*.

Moshe was instructed to speak to the rock and bring forth water and instead he hit it. The Chasam Sofer explains that Moshe was to speak to the rock to teach the people the power of speech. It is not only actions which bring about results, speech creates realities as well. But Moshe failed to teach this lesson. Words were supposed to be used instead of the staff. The absence of words resulted in Moshe's inability to enter the Land of Israel. And then we came to Balak:

"He sent messengers to Balaam the son of Beor, to Pethor, which is by the river of the land of his people, to call for him, saying, "A people has come out of Egypt, and behold, they have covered the "eye" of the land, and they are stationed opposite me. So now, please come and curse this people for me, for they are too powerful for me. Perhaps I will be able to wage war against them and drive them out of the land, for I know that whomever you bless is blessed and whomever you curse is cursed(Bamidbar 22:5-6)." Balak, the King of Moav, realized that he could not defeat the Jewish nation through conventional warfare and decided to try to beat them with words.

Through these stories and episodes the Torah reinforces for us the power of words. Words impact the other, words can hurt the other. We are living in tumultuous times. The current climate in our political landscape is one of constant attack and maligning of the other, the opponent. Terrible things have been said about our leaders and our leaders have in turn said terrible things about others. But it's ok – because it is only words. But my dear friends, it is not ok. Because it is not *"only words."* How we speak and what we say creates the very consciousness through which we formulate our plans for dynamic activity. How we speak influences how we think, approach others and ultimately act. We are careful to avoid *nivul peh* (*speaking profanities*). If you curse, swear and use inappropriate language, those words influence who you are and shape your actions. But profanities are not only four-letter words. Any word that is specifically used to hurt or deconstruct the other is a profanity as well.

There are real issues to deal with. In our current political landscape issues like healthcare, immigration and the economy impact us on a daily basis. We have our sacred right to agree or disagree with the



Balak: The Power of the Spoken Word

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

proposals and policies of our government. But we must always make our voices heard in a way which reflects the refined nature of our humanity and holiness.

We were shocked and saddened to hear of the allegations of fraud perpetrated by a number of religious families in Lakewood, New Jersey. It is important to remember that we must reserve final judgement until the legal system has run its course. We know that in many respects whatever the outcome is; the damage is done, the *Chilul Hashem* (desecration of God's name) has already been committed. Nevertheless, we must remain vigilant about the way we talk about others Jews and other communities. Each of us has our faults and weaknesses. We don't make excuses for the egregious mistakes of others nor do we sit in judgment and malign the other. We must resist the urge to make sweeping generalizations about segments of our people. In the same way in which we actively refrain from making generalizations about other minorities, recognizing that such statements would be racist; we must apply this same standard to our own.

In Israel we face our challenges. The current decision to "freeze" the Kotel compromise has many up in arms. The legislation to grant the Chief Rabbinate final decision making powers in matters of conversion has many worried about the status of certain converts. We don't have to agree on these issues (and I will not use this as a platform to advance for my own opinions) but we must disagree agreeably. Having a passionate position is not license to lash out or demean others. We must recognize that there are certain core issues on which the various streams of Judaism will never see eye to eye. We will disagree and remain steadfast in our positions. Our mission is to learn how to dialogue with dignity.

Let me end on a positive note. During our forty-year sojourn in the desert we were protected by the Divine cloud which hovered overhead. The Talmud explains that this cloud was given to us in the merit of Aharon HaKohen. The great tzaddik, Rav Yisroel of Ruzhin (1796-1850) explains the connection between Aharon and the cloud. Aharon's entire life-mission was to create peace and harmony within the ranks of the Jewish people. He would do whatever was necessary to restore *shalom* to the homes and lives of our nation. When a person speaks and exhales, there is breath which exits their body. Aharon spent his years sharing encouraging words, complimenting and building the sense of self of the other. The breath expended by all of these words and positive conversations coalesced and formed the cloud above the Nation of Israel. It was words of love, encouragement and unity which formed the protective cloud around our people.

There are challenging days ahead. There are real issues we must tackle and contend with. But we must be mindful to do with proper use of our speech. Words can harm, words can hurt and words can destroy. But words can do so much more. Words can heal and words can build. May we find the strength to use our gift of speech to grow as individuals, help the other and create the beautiful cloud of unity to envelope our nation.