

Drash on Parashat Balak

Ahavat Yeshua DC Service

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Parashat Balak is found about two thirds of the way through the fourth Book of the Torah, Bemidbar (Numbers in English). The Jewish name of the book means *In The Desert [of]* and the English name arose from the census the Book begins with, and it ends with the next generation, most born in the desert, ready to cross the Jordan River.

The name of this parashat is derived from the second Hebrew word which is the name of the reigning King of Moab. To provide the customary summation of the entire parashat, I quote Wikipedia:

In the parashah, [Balak](#) son of Zippor, [king](#) of [Moab](#), tries to hire [Balaam](#) to curse Israel, [\[1\]](#) Balaam's donkey speaks to [Balaam](#), [\[2\]](#) and Balaam blesses Israel instead.

Alas, there's more that Wikipedia's summary completely overlooks:

Then many Israelites followed foreign women into their idolatry, fomenting Divine retribution stemmed only by zealous action on the part of Aaron's grandson, Phinehas.

Discerning what The LORD wanted brought out for this drash came quickly, which was fortunate, because I only found out about needing to compose this drash near the end of June. We will begin with the Torah reading.

Yah-a-mod, Karen bat George.

Karen will bless us with the Hebrew and English of Numbers 25:1-6 (TLV):

^{25:1} While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, ² who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods. ³ So Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor. And the LORD's anger burned against them.

⁴ The LORD said to Moses, "Take all the leaders of these people, kill them and expose them in broad daylight before the LORD, so that the LORD's fierce anger may turn away from Israel."

⁵ So Moses said to Israel's judges, "Each of you must put to death those of your people who have yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor."

⁶ Then an Israelite man brought into the camp a Midianite woman right before the eyes of Moses and the whole assembly of Israel while they were weeping at the entrance to the tent of meeting.

Does this passage induce revulsion within you? Such things should not be. Yet they too often are, even among people who claim devotion to The LORD.

Here the Israelites are on the cusp of finally entering The Promised Land with Jericho waiting on the other side of the river. The number of Israelites besides Moses, Joshua, and Caleb who remembered Egypt would have become quite small by now. Those who remembered the golden calf incident would have formed a slightly larger group. But the rest have surely heard about that and likely knew how

many Israelites perished in consequence (three thousand if you don't remember). This episode results in the death of eight times as many Israelites.

Was the greater consequence justified? Well, of course it was, since The LORD judged it appropriate. But why, then, was it justified? Perhaps there was a "generation gap" aspect in play, as most of these Israelites had never been slaves in Egypt and had had the Torah most, if not all, of their lives. There was also a difference in the idols involved. Regarding the newly minted calf, the Israelites proclaimed:

Ex 32:4b "This is your god, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."

But the Baal of Peor had a well-established history that was quite different. Indeed, the name is apparently a bluntly graphic description of what manner of worship this god required. There is no way anybody could have been deceived about this god being the god who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt.

Not long after this transpired, Moses started a long address to the Israelites exhorting them to obey all the Torah. Beginning in Deuteronomy chapter four, he said:

4:1 Now, Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. 2 Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you.

3 You saw with your own eyes what the LORD did at Baal Peor. The LORD your God destroyed from among you everyone who followed the Baal of Peor, 4 but all of you who held fast to the LORD your God are still alive today.

Did that subsequent training enable all the Israelites to follow those commands? Alas, no. The seventh chapter of Joshua tells how within a matter of months, after the miraculous victory at Jericho, Israel suffered defeat as about 36 warriors died trying to take the municipality of Ai. The LORD revealed the cause as the sin of Achan and resulted in him, his family, and all their animals being stoned to death, then they and all their possessions were burned and buried. This sad tale magnifies the reality that our sins can have unintended consequences beyond ourselves, even to bringing harm our nation.

And should you be tempted to think Yeshua's death and resurrection nullified the consequences of sin for His disciples, you need to remember Acts chapter 5.

Yah-a-mod, Elaine bat Benyahmeen Moshay.

5:1 Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. 2 With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

3 Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? 4 Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."

5 When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. 6 Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

⁷ About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

⁸ Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"

"Yes," she said, "that is the price."

⁹ Peter said to her, "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

¹⁰ At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

Peter's questions hang in the air unanswered. This occurred while the Followers of The Way were still only Jewish, everyone was filled with the Ruach H'Kodesh, and the miraculous was normal. Surely Ananias and Sapphira had not feigned receipt of the infilling. How *was* it possible they could choose to do what they did? I think that probably isn't important. It is certainly not as important as recognizing such choices *are* possible. They chose to misrepresent what level of sacrifice their gift to The Body represented. The level of consequence they reaped was certainly related to their proximity to The LORD's holiness. You may not be held to an elder's standard, but you will be held to a believer's standard.

There's no humor in this drash, and no apology for that. Sometimes sobriety and gravity are essential. It is usually better to be motivated in life by the carrots than by the sticks, of course, and it is always far better to primarily desire to please The LORD than to primarily desire to receive some blessing or not receive some curse. But we can get ourselves into conditions when the carrots are insufficient to influence us to do the right things. At such times, failure to think about the sticks becomes very dangerous. May we all be wise in regard to these realities, for life is not a game. Chose life.

The next parashat is *Pinchas* which spans Numbers chapter 25 verse 10 through chapter 29 verse 40.