

False Prophets

Shabbat Balak

Friday June 25th

Numbers Chapters 22-24.

It seems strange that the whole Parsha we read this week should be named after a Midianite/Moabite King, Balak, and be devoted to a non-Jewish magician Bilam.

Not only, but there was a suggestion (Talmud Brachot 12b) that the poem should have been recited with the Shema every single day. The only reason they did not, was because they were reluctant to impose it on the community since it would drag out the services for too long. It makes you wonder why since those days we have prolonged the daily services a lot more than that.

Even so, whenever we enter the synagogue, we quote Bilam's famous words "Ma Tovu Ohalecyha Yaakov." "How good your tents are, Jacob." Originally, this had nothing to do with synagogues but referred to the homes and families.

The poetry God put into Bilam's song contains many jewels. Such as "Magic and wizardry have no place in Jacob." Or "Israel is a people that dwells alone and is not counted (respected) amongst the nations" which is as true today as ever it has been for thousands of years. And similarly, "He may lie down and crouch, but like a lion but he will always get back up."

The message of the Torah and why it finds a place in the Torah at this stage is that there are indeed prophets and great minds amongst the nations of the world. But we should be careful not to be misled by them or their messages when they come up against us and our traditions. Bilam's powers came when he invoked God but as soon as he was left to his open devices, he used them destructively to council a different way of undermining Israelite morale. We must always beware of false prophets.

This was why these chapters found a place here in the Torah just when the Israelites were about to encounter for the first time in a generation, alien cultures whose values clashed with theirs. The message was that in certain areas other cultures have a great deal to offer. But they also present grave dangers to us and to our way of life. There was and always will be conflict. We need to differentiate friend from foe, positive from negative, true prophets from false ones and not be afraid to stand our ground.

Shabbat Shalom Rabbi Jeremy