

PARASHAS CHUKAS /BALAK

The Seesaw Principle

If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. This was apparently the philosophy of Balak, King of Moab, when he was faced with the vast multitude of the Jewish people approaching his lands. Terrorstricken, he sent messengers to summon Bilam, the famous sorcerer, to come to Moab and curse the Jewish people.

Balak led Bilam to a high promontory from which they saw the entire Jewish encampment. Balak gleefully rubbed his hands together in anticipation of Bilam's potent curses, but to his astonishment, blessings rather than curses poured forth from Bilam's mouth.

Frustrated, Balak took Bilam to a different vantage point from which he could only see the edge of the encampment. Once again, Balak implored Bilam to curse the Jewish people, and once again, he could only speak blessing rather than curses.

Finally, Bilam turned to face the Wilderness and managed to utter some vague, ineffectual curses.

The commentators are puzzled. Why did Bilam repeatedly narrow his focus on the Jewish people after each failure to curse them?

A quick look into this week's Torah portion brings Bilam's character into sharp relief. His most striking features were his bloated ego and his insatiable hunger for flattery. People seeking constant self-aggrandizement generally tend to disparage and humiliate others. Whether consciously or subconsciously, they feel superior only when they diminish other people. By putting others down, their own egos are by contrast inflated. They view life like a seesaw, with themselves on one side and the world on the other. If the other side goes down, they go up.

Balak understood this aspect of Bilam's character, and he played on it. At first, he brought Bilam to a point where he could see the entire people. If Bilam could curse and disparage an entire people, what a surge his ego would enjoy. But he was unsuccessful. Conceding failure, he narrowed his focus to only part of the people, concentrating on individuals in the hope that their shortcomings would be more glaring. Once again he was unsuccessful, and therefore, he narrowed his focus even more by cursing the people even though he was unable to highlight any particular fault. But even these curses were ineffectual, because Hashem protects the righteous.

Two businessmen were once sitting in a bar, discussing the state of the world.

“You know,” said the first man, “if you really think about it, there are really only two classes of people in the world - our countrymen and foreigners. And we both know that all foreigners are totally worthless.”

“Of course,” said the second man. “But even among our countrymen there is clear division into two classes. The city dwellers and the peasants.”

“Exactly,” said the first man. “And we both know that peasants are worse than useless. Only city dwellers are worth anything at all. But even among city dwellers, there are two classes - intellectuals and businessmen.”

“I totally agree,” said the second man. “Intellectuals are pointy-headed fools. Totally useless. Only businessmen have any worth.”

“But not all businessmen are worthy,” said the first man. “Plenty of them are nothing more than bumbling fools.”

“I agree,” said the second man. “In fact, if you really think about it. You can probably rule out just about every businessman on one count or another. I guess, that just leaves us with me and you, my friend.”

“Exactly,” said the first man, “and just between you and me, we both perfectly well that you’re nothing but a windbag.”

In our own lives, we may sometimes find ourselves bring inadvertently critical of other people or even entire ethnic or racial groups. Perhaps we would do well to look into ourselves to find the source of these sentiments. Why in the world should we be flirting with meanspiritedness and bigotry? Why should we be so eager to highlight other people’s flaws? More likely than not, these are sign of latent insecurities which mistakenly lead us to think we can secure ourselves better by undermining others. In actuality, however, tearing other people down only diminishes and demeans us, while looking at them in a positive light enhances our spirits and brings us the serenity and satisfaction of recognizing our own true worth.