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THE STRENGTH OF THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL RESIDES IN THEIR UNITY

(by Rabbi David Hanania Pinto שליט"א)

It is written, "Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorite. Moab became very frightened of the people because it was numerous, and Moab was disgusted in the face of the Children of Israel" (Numbers 22:2-3).

There are several points that need to be clarified here.

1. Why did Balak fear the Children of Israel, to the point that he and all his people were disgusted of life because of their fear? Even if they had seen all that Israel had done to the Amorite, this was still not a reason to fear the Children of Israel, for it was sufficient to let them pass by their border, contrary to what the Amorite did, in which case no harm could have come to them, neither to them nor to their wealth. And this does not even take into account that the Children of Israel had received the order, "You shall not distress Moab, and you shall not provoke war with them" (Deuteronomy 2:9).

2. The verse that states, "For I know that whom ever you bless is blessed, and whomever you curse is cursed" (Numbers 22:6) must also be understood. Regarding this, the Sages have said: "For I know – because of the war of Sihon, whom you [Balaam] assisted in conquering Moab" (Tanhuma ibid. 4, Rashi). Where is the proof for this? If Balaam participated in the war of Sihon against Moab and was victorious, does this at all imply that he could now conquer the Children of Israel? The latter had fought more difficult wars, and with the help of the Eternal had vanquished Amalek, Egypt, etc. From where, therefore, did Balak obtain this assurance that he would be able to defeat Israel if Balaam would help him, to the point of saying "For I know" with absolute certainty?

3. If we say that Balaam did in fact have the power to defeat anyone, why did he remain indifferent and not come to the aid of Sihon and Og when the Children of Israel fought against them? This proves that he was not absolutely certain that he could defeat them!

nothing other than to perpetually stay malevolent, and he dreaded that his own people become involved in learning how to do good from the Children of Israel. This is why he said, "Now the congregation will lick up our entire surroundings" (Numbers 22:4), meaning that up to now they were surrounded by wickedness and evil, but at present he feared that the proximity of the Children of Israel would have a good influence on his people, and that they would learn from their good deeds. This is why it was a question of a "congregation", for it was the trait of a "congregation" (communal spirit, beneficial union) that he feared.

Balak also presented Balaam with the following argument: The entire success of the Children of Israel lay in the fact that they constituted a community, that they were united. The verse also states, "Moab became very frightened of the people because it was numerous" (Numbers 22:3), their number adding to the performance of the mitzvot. In fact, what was not accomplished by one was accomplished by the other, and together they observed all 613 mitzvot, in the spirit of the expression, "with a perfect union, in the name of all Israel." We know that the entire reason for the descent into Egypt was the baseless hatred that the brothers had for the righteous Joseph (see Shabbat 10b). We also know that while in Egypt they were reduced to slavery because among them there were slander mongers (Shemot Rabba 1:30), as Moses our teacher himself said: "The matter is known" (Exodus 2:14).

Yet at present, they had repaired this sin and found themselves perfectly united with one another, as it is said, "Behold! A people has come out of Egypt," all united like single man. In addition, they covered the country, they were victorious in war, they defeated Sihon and Og (who were protecting Moab – Tanhuma ibid. 4), and their unity gave them considerable strength. Now they had settled in front of Moab, settled in their tents, occupied with Torah and the unified service of G-d, and thus had the ability to conquer Moab.

We shall attempt to explain all this. Balak desired

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Consequently, Balak said, "So now – please come and curse this people for me" (Numbers 22:6), which is as if Balak were saying, "Give me advice on the way in which to fight them, so that I may create a breach in their unity. Do this because they are more powerful than me [v.6], and they may have a good influence on my people. If I can divide them, perhaps I can diminish them [see Tanhuma ibid.]. Perhaps we can manage to make a small number of them hate each other, and therefore I can chase them from my country. They will then be pursued and separated from one another. It is only necessary to make a breach in their unity in order for G-d to punish them."

In fact, the Sages have said, "Jerusalem was destroyed because of Katzma and Bar Katzma" (see Gittin 55b). The hate between two people brought about the destruction of the entire city. How much more, then, will mass dissension among the Children of Israel bring about failure in their wars against the nations.

In reality, Balak knew how much G-d detests discord and controversy, for even the Torah was not given to the Children of Israel before they were perfectly united, as it is written, "Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain" (Exodus 19:2) "as a single man with a single heart" (Mechilta ibid.). This is why Balak wanted advice on the best way to separate them, and this is the sense of the verse that states, "My people, hear now what Balak, king of Moab, schemed" (Micah 6:5). Balak did not wish to fight, which is why he looked for a way to separate the Children of Israel. This is the reason why he told Balaam, "For I know that whomever you bless is blessed," which is as if Balak had said, "It is true that you were not able to help Sihon in his war against the Children of Israel, for no people can do anything against them while they are united, and they will thereby always be victorious. However, let us try to find a way to divide them, thus allowing us to diminish them a little" (see Tanhuma Nitzavim 1).

We note here that two people commit a wrong greater than a single person. Because of their fear of the Children of Israel (Sanhedrin 105a), Midian and Moab made peace between themselves in order to fight against their unity. And Balak taught this method to all the generations, to the point that we actually see that the nations unite against the Children of Israel. Yet because of G-d's goodness, this union did not help them. Even Balak and Balaam ended up by parting ways: "Now, flee to your place" (Numbers 14:11). G-d rewarded their plans measure for measure (Shabbat 105b), and in the end their own people fought with one another and separated themselves from each other.

Balaam had effectively understood by himself that G-d protects us from all harm, and that when Israel is

united, no people can dominate him. At that moment Balaam cried out and said, "Behold! It is a people that dwells alone, and among the nations it will not be reckoned" (Numbers 23:9). Having seen that the entrances to their tents did not face one another, nor were gender-mixed (so that there be no indiscretion among them – Bava Batra 60a), Balaam added, "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel" (Numbers 24:5). The Hebrew words *am levadad ishcon* ("a people that dwells alone") has exactly the same numerical value as the words *lev ha'am hazeh be'achdut* ("the heart of this people is in unity"). And the expression *mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov* ("how goodly are your tents, O Jacob") has exactly the same numerical value as the words *ve'am gueulei Hashem ohavim zeh lazeh* ("And a people redeemed by G-d are moved to love one another"). In this, Balaam made an allusion to the fact that when the Children of Israel are united, no one can cast the evil eye on them and harm them.

And even if they sin, the nations cannot vanquish them as long as they are united, as it is written, "He perceived no iniquity in Jacob, and saw no perversity in Israel" (Numbers 23:21). We may ask ourselves the following: G-d never forgoes judging sin according to His will, and the one who claims the contrary will have to give up his bowels for this (Bava Kama 50a). How can He therefore close His eyes to the sin of the Children of Israel? The answer is that when they form a united whole, even if they are idolaters, Divine justice does not affect them (Tanhuma Shoftim 18). We find an example of this occurring during the generation of Ahab (Vayikra Rabba 26:5), during which time they went to war and returned victorious, even though they worshipped idols. This was because they were united and there were no informers among them. This is the meaning of "and the shout of a king is among him" (Numbers 23:21). As long as he remains united, when he calls with the trumpet during wartime he dominates the enemy. The expression *u'teru'at melech bo* ("and the shout of a king is among him") has exactly the same numerical value as *derech tovim Israel arevim zeh lazeh* ("the good path for Israel is to be responsible for one another").

This is how Balaam encouraged the Children of Israel to remain united. He told Balak, "You have said, 'A people has come out of Egypt,' but they did not come out by themselves. Rather, it was G-d Who brought them out of Egypt. Despite their sins, the Children of Israel left because they were united, and when they are united they can vanquish anyone and bring themselves closer to G-d" (Tanhuma ibid. 14).

IN MEMORY OF THE TZADIKIM RABBI MORDECHAI AMIYES HACOHEN

Hashem always hears the prayers of a mother. When he was a child, the mother of Rabbi Mordechai Amiyes Hacoheh prayed that her son become great in Israel. And in fact Rabbi Mordechai Amiyes grew up and enlightened the eyes of Israel with his wisdom.

His first steps were taken under the direction of the Gaon Rabbi Yossef Berebi. He then went to deepen his study of Shas and the Poskim in the yeshiva of Rabbi Moshe Zaken Mazouz. His reputation as an eminent Talmudic scholar did not take long to become known to all.

Torah was so valuable in his eyes that he studied every day without stop and gave himself but three hours of rest. He avoided sleeping too much due to his fear of losing precious time for study.

In the year 5715 (1955), Rabbi Mordechai replaced Rabbi David Ben Baron as head of the rabbanim and became the Rosh Av Beit Din of Tunisia. He occupied this position until the end of his life and faithfully consecrated himself with devotion to the entire community. He was constantly preoccupied with the spiritual life of each individual, always pushing to preserve and enrich Judaism.

His close relations with the president of Tunisia, President Bourguiba, helped to ease the life of the Jews. When the president fell ill, Rabbi Mordechai assembled the Jews in all the synagogues throughout Tunisia so they could pray for his health. A few days later, Rabbi Mordechai went to the bedside of the president, who warmly greeted him and said, "I know that it's only because of your prayers and those of the Jews that I recovered."

One day, Tunisian authorities decided to transform an ancient Jewish cemetery into a municipal park. This news stunned the entire Jewish community, and they were not able to annul this decision by their own efforts.

President Bourguiba had entrusted this project to a Jewish engineer, and therefore Rabbi Mordechai, accompanied by a delegation of the community's notable men, went to see him at the graveyard. During this meeting, the engineer didn't want to hear anything, and he remained uncompromising.

"You are a Jew!" Rabbi Mordechai exclaimed, "How can you disturb the peace of the righteous?"

The engineer did not bend, but rather continued to refuse.

Seeing the godlessness of this man, Rabbi Mordechai told his delegation to distance themselves from the cemetery. He then turned towards the graves and said, "We have done our part, yet only this godless man stands in the way. Do to him what seems right to you."

THE MORAL OF THE STORY AND MOAB GREATLY FEARED THE PEOPLE *A teaching of the Maggid of Dubno*

And Moab greatly feared the people" (Numbers 22:3). The Midrash states, "The word vayagar [and he feared] evokes the word ger [stranger] – he lived like a stranger in the world."

The Maggid of Dubno explains this verse to us with the following parable.

There was once a rich man who owned great amounts of silver and gold. One day, a swindler came with the intention of seizing everything he had. When the rich man sensed that the swindler had gotten away with two or three precious objects, he firmly closed the door to him and didn't let him pass over his doorstep. What did the swindler then do? He convinced all the neighbors to go and borrow silver objects from their rich neighbor, and then he went and stole from them. The rich man then cried out, "From now on, I don't know who I should protect myself more from, and who I should close the door to!"

In this way, the peoples trembled before the Children of Israel, with the exception of Moab, who felt a sense of security because of the warning given to Israel that stated, "Do not distress Moab" (Deuteronomy 2:9). However, in noting that Hashem had found a way for allowing Moab to be attacked through the intermediary of Sihon (since G-d had not given Sihon a warning not to attack Moab, and since Sihon in fact did conquer him), Moab felt like stranger in the country, and asked himself who the Holy One, blessed be He, was going to use to deliver him unto Israel.

Rabbi Mordechai and the men of the community went back home. The next day, people learned that the engineer had been involved in a terrible accident.

The imposing figure of Rabbi Mordechai and his deep gaze gave him a particular aura. His kindness and great spirit shone on whoever encountered him.

It is said that he had the habit of praying very early in the morning in the yeshiva of Rabbi Menachem Hori. One evening, after studying with his friends, he remained to meditate on a difficulty raised by the Gaon Rabbi Akiva Eguere. He remained there studying until the first hours of the morning – the time at which his friends came back to pray – without ever leaving his book! They found him exactly as they had left him the day before, bent over the Gemara, not differentiating between day and night!

Rabbi Mordechai had the privilege of living a long time. His days were prolonged until the age of 88, departing this world in the year 5734 (1974).