

Shabbat Sermon: Chukat-Balak
Rabbi Dr. Walter Homolka, Abraham Geiger College Berlin
Union Conference, 12th July 2003

After two impressive victories against the Canaanites of the Negev and the Amorites in Transjordan, the looming military might of Israel throws the leaders of Moab into a panic. Only the land of the Moabites separates Israel from the Jordan River and the conquest of Canaan. Balak ben Zippor, King of Moab, knows that he is next. In desperation, he takes recourse in an unconventional pre-emptive measure. He summons Balaam son of Beor, a sorcerer from Mesopotamia to curse Israel, making it susceptible to defeat on the battlefield. Though Balaam comes, God frustrates the plan. Within the monotheistic framework of the Torah, Balaam can utter only what God imparts to him. Hence he ends up in rapturous praise of Israel, much to the consternation of Balak.

One of the two Torah selections, which we read this Shabbat is named for a Gentile, a pagan, a non-Israelite, Balak, the king of Moab. It is interesting to note that of the five Torah selections named for individuals, three are named for non-Israelites: Noah, Yitro, and Balak. Only two readings are named for members of the house of Israel: Haye Sarah and Pinchas.

Perhaps our Torah was sharing an important lesson through these names.

Wisdom can indeed be learned from the nations surrounding Israel. Noah, the first honored Gentile, is called an "ish tsaddik", a righteous individual. Noah is said to have walked with God. Yitro, the father-in-law of Moses, is Moses' confidant and advisor. He wisely encourages Moses to delegate authority and proposes varying levels of administration.

Balak is the source of the beautiful prayer enshrined in the Siddur. "How goodly are your tents O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel." These words, ironically, were uttered by the pagan prophet Balaam. If we examine the Torah and rabbinic literature, there are certainly many models of non-Jews who were a source of guidance and enlightenment for our people, from the daughter of Pharaoh to Rahab of Jericho to Roman emperors in rabbinic texts.

Modern Jewish scholarship is based upon the premise that the most creative periods of Judaism were a result of the symbiosis between Jews and the surrounding culture. Saul Lieberman's great study, "Greek in Jewish Palestine", demonstrates the influence of Greek law upon the development of Mishnaic and Rabbinic Judaism. The period known as the Golden Age of Spain was a result of the interrelationship between Jews, Muslims, and Christians on the Iberian Peninsula.

The creative interchange among the three faiths has given us the giants of medieval thought - Maimonides in Judaism, Aquinas in Catholicism, and Ibn Rushd in Islam. The dialogue served to enrich each faith's self-understanding.

Classical Judaism, whether during the Biblical, rabbinic, or even much of the medieval period, did not isolate itself from the surrounding world. Ironically, both Maimonides, the epitome of rationalism, and the Kabbalah, the world of mysticism, drew from Greek philosophy. Maimonides followed the doctrines of Aristotle, while the Kabbalah was influenced by neo-Platonism. It was Maimonides who first offered a positive analysis of Christianity that still serves as a basis for Jews seeking to enter into constructive relationships with Christian thinkers today.

Unfortunately, we do not always fully appreciate the incredible creativity of the German Jewish community prior to the Holocaust. The relationship between German and Jewish culture produced the giants of nineteenth and twentieth century Judaism – Israel Jacobson, Abraham Geiger, Leopold Zunz, Ludwig Philippson, Leo Baeck, Martin Buber, Abraham Jehoschua Heschel, and Franz Rosenzweig. If we observe contemporary American Judaism, the models that currently serve to instruct us well do not turn their back on society, but embrace and relate to it.

The Talmud speaks of "hochmah yevanit", Greek wisdom. The classical rabbis did not deny that they could learn from the general cultural environment. A traditional statement speaks of the beauty of Yafet, the son of Noah, in the home of Shem.

Sadly, when many of us conjure up images of religious Judaism, all too often we conceive of individuals who portray general society as something to be ignored or only criticized. Many feel that Judaism must be isolated from the general culture to thrive. The world of Jewish tradition and contemporary thought are seen as enemies, rather than as partners that might enrich one another. Yet, Judaism has been at its most creative and responsive when it has interacted with the world surrounding it.

The great Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Kuk, realized the importance of this give-and-take process. "There is no creation in the world of a positive nature that is not anchored in Jewish sources. Those Jews who are drawn powerfully to those positive creations which they find in the culture of the nations, are actually only seeking to return to Judaism what belongs to it, and what was taken from it.

What looks to the Jewish secular nationalist as the broadening of Jewish national identity by borrowing from foreign culture, is only a return of scattered elements of Judaism to its bosom."

Hidden behind a traditional wording Rabbi Kuk seeks to understand and empathize with a modern Israel that is enriched through its encounter with the world around it. Perhaps if Rabbi Kuk were alive today, he would have had the spiritual strength to condemn the injustice practised in Israel as regards Reform and Conservative synagogues.

This week our tradition reminds us that of all people, the gentile prophet Balaam taught us a most important lesson. The most beautiful and goodly element of Israel

is its religious life in synagogues and institutions of higher rabbinic learning (Sanhedrin 105 b). There, we get inspired by the universalist message of the Jewish prophets "to heal the world". And it is our urge for spiritual growth as citizens in ever more pluralistic societies that makes us turn in awe to the particulars of our Jewish religious heritage which Balaam praises so much.

If we would learn that lesson from Balaam, the pagan prophet, Judaism is sure to prosper also in the future.