


CHABAD

RESEARCH UNIT

שבת..... *for Friday nights* קדש

Friday 6 July 2012 - 16 Tammuz 5772
 Sedra Balak

FAR OR NEAR

IDEALS CAN BE VERY DISTANT AND FAR OFF. WE **S**PEAK OF a ‘remote’ ideal, or even of an ‘unattainable’ ideal. By contrast we can also think of ideals which *are* ultimately attainable, however elusive they may seem. This question relates to the fact that this Shabbat is 17th Tammuz, usually a fast day relating to the destruction of the First Temple. Because of Shabbat, the fast is delayed till Sunday. However, with this fast, and another fast which is more severe on 9th Av 3 weeks later, comes the ancient promise of Redemption.

The idea that one day the Temple will be rebuilt and the world will be a realm of peace and goodness can appear very remote. Yet it is part of our Torah, as we see in the Sedra¹. Balaam, the heathen prophet, had been hired by the Moabite King Balak to curse the Jews. Balaam failed to do this, and despite himself was forced by G-d to give them beautiful and memorable blessings, angering King Balak. Then to cap it all, the prophet reveals the events of the future: “I see it but not now; I perceive it, but not in the near future. A star will spurt from Jacob..”²

Balaam, speaking about 3300 years ago, describes the coming of the Messiah as something happening in the remote future. Later our great Jewish prophets, recorded in the Bible, spoke about the time of the Messiah, when nations would no longer make war and all humanity would recognise G-d together. The epoch of moral and spiritual maturation of humanity began to seem more imminent.

Unfortunately, instead of the Temple becoming a world centre for worship of G-d it was destroyed; instead of universal peace, humanity was continually beset by war, evil and personal depravity.

However, a positive effect of these hopes was a strong faith for the future: despite the destruction of both the First and Second Temples, the Jewish people knew that the Torah lived on and that eventually its values would prevail. Hope in the imminent coming of Moshiach inspired great Sages like Rabbi Akiva. He saw Bar Kochba, who sought to gain independence for the Jews round 135CE, as a man who could be the Messiah. Bar Kochba got his name from our Sedra: *kochav* means the 'star' which will spurt from Jacob.

The Romans crushed the Bar Kochba revolt with terrible brutality; yet this did not extinguish the hope for the Messiah. The Talmud comments that about seventy years later the great leader and descendant of King David, Rabbi Judah the Prince, was regarded as a potential Messiah figure³. Perhaps for this reason the Mishnah which he compiled, the basis of the Talmud, became the central text of Jewish study until our own time.

The Talmud discusses the question of when the Messiah will come. In terms of all the ancient prophetic predictions, it claims, Messiah can come right now. In a beautiful spiritual experience the Talmudic sage Rabbi Joshua son of Levi asked when the Messiah would come. He was told: "Today, if you listen to G-d's voice"⁴.

As in all aspects of our lives as Jews, the Talmud, explained by later Sages, presents guidance on how to think about the Messiah. The goal of existence is not a remote, unattainable ideal. It is very close, almost within our grasp. This message has been emphasised by great 20th century Sages such as the Chafetz Chaim and the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Both told us to prepare for the Messiah through Torah study and keeping Mitzvot.

The Rebbe also added that acts of goodness and kindness, by every human being, help to bring the Messiah closer. Torah study, Mitzvot, goodness and kindness: that part, at least, is up to us!

1. Numbers 22:2- 25:9. 2. Num.24:17. 3. Sanhedrin 98b. 4. Sanhedrin 98a.

Torah teachings are holy - please treat this page with care
SPONSORED BY DR REUVEN JOEL



53

SEDRA BALAK

CHANGING BAD INTO GOOD

David crept quietly around the gate into Mr. Green's garden. There was no-one around. He picked up his garden shovel and with a grim smile said "hmmm - this will pay back that mean old man for stealing my new football!!" On all fours David went over to a flower bed with tiny green shoots sticking out. Smirking to himself he started to dig.

Halfway through the flower-bed he heard a sudden noise and leapt back into his own garden. A tabby cat strolled past. "Just a cat!" But by then David was feeling more than a little guilty for what he had done.

"Where have you been, David?", his older sister Chava asked. David was by now feeling terribly upset over what he had done. He felt like crying. He told Chava about how Mr Green kept taking away his footballs when they fell in his garden, and how he wanted to pay him back by digging up his flowers. He had read a story about someone doing that in a book at school. But now he felt very upset about it. What could he do to make things better?

Chava felt sorry for her brother. "Maybe you could offer to do some gardening for him", she suggested.

David went upstairs to his room where he gloomily stared at the wall, wondering how he could make amends.

When David came back down he was horrified to see old Mr Green standing there talking to his parents. He tried to squeeze by quietly without being seen, but Mr. Green turned and pointed to him, saying "Ahhh! This is the boy!"

David turned bright red and stuck his hands deep into his pockets. "I was just telling your parents what a wonderful son they have! I find it very hard to bend to take out all those little weeds and I really appreciate your doing it for me. Ahhh, a lovely child, Mrs. Levi, maybe not so good with aiming balls, but such a help, such a....."

David escaped into the living-room where Chava was sitting on the couch laughing. "Well, now he wants you to come and finish off the job for him! Your wishes have come true!"

Then she suddenly clapped her hands. "Hey, this is a little bit like what my teacher was saying about this week's Sedra. Balak was this wicked king who wanted to hurt the Jews so he got this heathen prophet Balaam to come and curse them. But when Balaam came to curse them, there was a miracle, and blessings came out of his mouth instead."

"You're right," said David. "I thought he was going to complain about me, but instead he said how good I am!"

"No," I don't mean that, said Chava. "*You* wanted to hurt his garden - but instead you helped make it better!"

David decided that he would never try to harm anyone again. He did not want to be like Balaam - even if in the end the bad *was* changed to good!

***Torah teachings are holy –
please treat this page with care***