



## BRINGING IT HOME

*Harav Y. Reuven Rubin Shlita*

"Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never harm me", goes an old school chant that somehow still rumbles about in my memory. Of course, we all know that this is not the case, words do hurt, sometimes more than any rock.

Currently, we are witnessing the corrosive power of hateful words as the world once again turns its collective back on the Jewish people. The existence of unfettered electronic information that spews forth anti-Semitic tropes 24/7, makes it possible for the lies of our enemies to find fertile breeding grounds in the furthest reaches of the world. Once spoken the falsehoods spread rampantly without borders.

Are these words hurtful? Should we lose faith in our Divine role? Obviously not, yet we are all human and the attacks leave their scars.

In Parshas Balak we are introduced to the episode wherein the local King reached out to the pagan prophet Bilaam. Frightened by the approach of the Jewish people as they neared the Land of Israel, Balak, the other kings of Moav and Midyan hired Bilaam to curse the Jewish people –

"Now, please go and curse for me this nation, for it is too mighty for me; perhaps I will prevail, smite them, and drive them from the land..."

Bilaam took on the job, but, time and again, try as he may, his curses were turned by Hashem into blessings: each and every time he tried to cast imprecations on Bnei Yisroil, Hashem miraculously put the most beautiful poetry into his mouth, in which he praised the people of Israel.

It seems that there was some celestial game going on here. After all, Hashem could allow Bilaam to utter his



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curses to his heart's content, and then simply ignore his words. Why make such a big deal out of his rantings? Why does Hashem seem to indicate that what comes out of Bilaam's mouth is so important, to the extent that He performs this playful miracle of fooling around with what Bilaam says so that it comes out well for the Jews?

Perhaps we are being taught an interesting lesson about the power of the spoken word here. Were Bilaam to successfully condemn the Jewish people, were he to curse and revile them, those words would have power; the Jews who heard them would be disheartened, the Midyanites who heard them would be encouraged; the atmosphere and the balance between these people would be affected, subtle and not-so-subtle psychological changes would take place, all of which would, apparently, weaken the Israelites and strengthen their enemies. If, on the other hand, Bilaam himself, prophet of Midyan and Moav, heaps praises on the Jewish people, proclaiming:

“Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov...” – “How goodly are thy tents, Yaakov, and thy tabernacles, O Israel” – that, too, had an effect; demoralizing the already nervous Midyanites, and strengthening the resolve of the Jews.

Unfortunately, here in our present Golus our enemies are given the ability to indulge in cursing us. What can we do to deflect the impact their words may have on us, even if only emotionally?

In Avos we learn, (1:12) ‘Hillel and Shamai received Torah from them. Hillel said: Be a disciple of Aharon, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving your fellow creatures and attracting them to the Torah.’”

Why are we not blessed with Divine intervention wherein our enemies' words are miraculously exchanged for blessings?

It may well be because we have forgotten our end of the dynamic. Do we act as disciples of Aharon? Do we show love for others and seek to bring them closer to the Torah's eternal truths?

Sadly, sometimes we find some talking about others with little regard to the impact our words may have. Instead of pursuing peace with one another it sometimes seems that we foster new and imaginative ways of creating discord amongst ourselves. Bilaam stood on a mountain top and spoke of holy abodes where Yidden lived in peace and friendship. The Mishnah is telling us that those tents are our responsibility. We must create them with real words of caring concern, not with anger and rancor.

This Parsha always precedes the Three Weeks, a period of mourning over the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash. We know that all the pain started because of hate and jealousy amongst our own ranks. We can make a difference, we can blunt the curses of those who hate, we can do this and more, but it must start here in our own tents and homes.