

Parashat Balak 5775, 2015

What Does Hashem Really Want from Us?

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Rav Yosef Karo *zatzal* (1488-1575), in his work, *Kesef Mishneh*, briefly examines the historical origins regarding the recitation of the *haftarah* following regular Shabbat and Yom Tov Torah readings:

And it appears that they did not have at that time [i.e. the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods] fixed *haftarot* as we do today. [What, then, was their practice?] Each individual would read a *haftarah* regarding a subject that appeared to him to be connected to the day's Torah reading. Therefore, even in our own day and time, there are differences of opinion regarding the customs of the *haftarot* [as to which one should be read following each *parasha*]. (Gloss on *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Tefilah* 12:12, translation and brackets my own)

In sum, according to Rav Karo, the original selection of the *haftarot* was purely subjective in nature. The *maftir* (the person honored with the final *aliyah*) simply chose and recited a section of the *Nevi'im* (Prophets) that he deemed to be related to the Torah portion. This naturally resulted in diverse *haftarot* being read in different synagogues, villages, towns and countries. As time progressed, however, each community and ethnicity within our people codified the choice of the *haftarot* for both the Shabbat *parshiot* and Festival days.

On occasion, one is hard pressed to find a conceptual or thematic link between the *parasha* and the *haftarah*. This, however, is not the case regarding our Torah portion and

its *haftarah*. The final chapter of our *parasha* depicts the licentious acts of many of the men of the Generation of the Desert with the daughters of Moab:

Israel settled in Shittim, and the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of the Moabites. They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and prostrated themselves to their gods. Israel became attached to Baal Peor, and the anger of the L-rd flared against Israel. (*Sefer Bamidbar* 25:1-2, this, and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Chazal (our Sages may their memory be blessed) teach us these acts, and the accompanying idol worship, were meticulously orchestrated by the main figure of our Torah reading, Bilam the sorcerer, and implemented by Balak the king of Moab:

He [Bilam] said to him [Balak, the king of Moab]: “The G-d of these [the Jews] hates profligate and hedonistic behavior. In addition, they have a great desire for linen garments. Come and I will give you advice [as to how to defeat them]. Raise up tents for them enclosed by hangings in which you will place prostitutes, old women without and young women within, to sell them linen garments.” So he [Balak] pitched curtained tents from the snowy mountain [Hermon] as far as Beth ha-Yeshimot [i.e., right from north to south], and placed prostitutes in them — old women without, young women within. And when a Jewish [male] ate, drank, and was joyful, and went for a stroll in the market place, the old woman would say to him, “Do you not desire linen garments?” The old woman offered it at its current value, but the young one for less. This happened two or three times. After that she [the young one] would say to him, “You are now like one of the family, sit down and choose what you like. Gourds of Ammonite wine lay near her, and at that time non-Jewish wine was not yet prohibited. She would then say, “Would you like to drink a cup of wine?” Once he would drink the wine, [and became inebriated – Rashi] his passion would be ignited and he would declare to her, “Listen to me [regarding my request for carnal relations – Rashi]! At that moment, she took out an idol from beneath her clothing and said to him, “Worship this!” “But I am a Jew!” he protested. “Why should this [act] mean anything to you?” she rejoined, “The only thing you have to do is defecate before it!” The Jew, however, had no idea that this was its peculiar form of worship [and, therefore, fulfilled her request in order for her to submit to him.] (*Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin* 106a, translation, *The Soncino Talmud*, with my extensive emendations and brackets.)

This story of unrestrained lust and idol worship provides the direct link between our *parasha* and the *haftarah*, in which Michah the prophet declares: “My people, remember now what Balak king of Moab planned, and what Bilam the son of Beor answered him...” (*Sefer Michah* 6:5) The *pasuk* (verse) continues and asks the Jewish people to

“recognize the righteous deeds of the L-rd,” which stand in stark contrast to their behavior. Since Judaism is preeminently a religion of action, the *navi* (prophet) then asks us what form this recognition of Hashem’s actions and our subsequent reconciliation with Him should take:

With what shall I come before the L-rd, bow before the Most High G-d? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with yearling calves? Will the L-rd be pleased with thousands of rams, with myriad streams of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? (6:6-7)

In these two *pasukim*, Micah asks the Jewish people what they think they must do in order to achieve spiritual reunion with the Al-mighty. Is it to be endless animal offerings and “myriad streams of oil?” Does He, G-d forbid, want our firstborn children as expiation for our transgressions? The answer to both of these questions is a resounding “No!” Hashem desires something entirely different from us; He wants us to be transformed into spiritual beings: “He has told you, O man, what is good, and what the L-rd demands of you; but to do justice, to love loving-kindness, and to walk humbly with your G-d.” (6:8, with my emendation) What, we may well ask, is the meaning of each of these actions?

Talmud Bavli, Makkot 24a addresses our question in the following manner: “to do justice” refers to “*din*,” the adjudication of a case according to parameters of Jewish jurisprudence. “Loving-kindness” is synonymous with “*gemilut hasadim*,” acting kindly toward others from the depth of our being. “To walk humbly with your G-d,” is interpreted as “*hotza’at hamet*,” taking care of the needs of the departed, and “*hachnasat kallah*,” ensuring that a would-be bride will be able to have a proper and joyous wedding.

Based upon the Talmud's interpretation of the above-quoted verse from *Sefer Michah*, justice, loving-kindness and taking care of the needs of others, both living and dead, are some of the constitutive elements of authentic Jewish living. Therefore, it seems that the "fast track route" to drawing close to Hashem is to be found in treating the individuals He has created with justice, honor and dignity. With Hashem's help, may we have the wisdom and strength of character to draw closer to Him by treating one another as precious beings created in His holy and ineffable image. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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