

BALAK (NUMBERS 22:2-25:9)

Rocky Road

2010 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

THE 17th OF TAMMUZ AND THE THREE WEEKS

Next Wednesday night thru Thursday, July 1-2, is the 17th of Tammuz, which begins a three week period of increasing mourning leading up to Tisha B'av, the anniversary of the destruction of the Temple.

Much like a mourner during the 30 days following the death of a loved one, we refrain from listening to music, making weddings, and taking haircuts during these three weeks. The 17th of Tammuz itself is a fast day. It is permitted to get up early Tuesday morning to eat before the fast begins. The fast begins Thursday at dawn, (72 minutes before sunrise.) It ends at dusk, (25-72 minutes after sunset, depending upon local custom.) For sunrise and sunset times for your community google "sunrise and sunset in (your city)"

The 17th of Tammuz commemorates five events:

1. Moses came down from Mt. Sinai and broke the Tablets when he saw the Golden Calf.
2. Due to the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, there were no longer sheep available for the daily offering in the first Temple.
3. The Romans breached the walls of Jerusalem, three weeks before destroying the second Temple.
4. A Torah scroll was burnt.
5. An idol was placed into the Temple.

Some people make the mistake of assuming that the main Mitzvah on a fast day is to refrain from eating. This is a fallacy. The purpose of a fast is to turn our focus away from the physical and material, and to emphasize the spiritual. It is a time to evaluate our relationship with our Creator. A fast day is a time to ask G-d to watch over our Nation and keep us safe and secure.

Some commemorative days can be a little difficult to really relate to. On Shavuot, for example, it is a challenge to put oneself in a mindset where we can actually envision ourselves standing at Mt. Sinai. The 17th of Tammuz is different.

Jerusalem and all of the Land of Israel are under siege at this very moment. Our People are being murdered and world opinion is increasingly aligned against us.

It is time for us to take the situation seriously and beg G-d to help us. Let us pray that this year will be the last year that the 17th of Tammuz is a fast day, and that we will soon be privileged to see the redemption of our People, the rebuilding of our Temple, and peace in the world.

“Rocky Road”

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 105a) refers to two dogs that always fought against each other. One day a wolf attacked one of the dogs. The second dog thought, "If the wolf kills my enemy today, he'll kill me tomorrow." The two "enemy" dogs joined forces and killed the wolf.

Moab and Midian were two nations that had never seen a day of peace. However, they saw how Israel miraculously defeated two powerful nations. (See "The Bigger They Are ...") Fearing that they might be next in line for conquest, these two warring nations set aside their differences to achieve their common goal of destroying Israel. (Isn't it amazing how the more things change, the more they stay the same?)

Balak, a Midianite prince, was appointed king of Moab. He sent a delegation of Moabite and Midianite elders to solicit the services of Balaam the Sorcerer. Rashi explains that the Midianites understood that Moses, who had spent many years in their country, derived his strength through "his mouth." (i.e., prayer) They hoped that Balaam, through his black magic incantations, would be able "fight fire with fire," and overpower Moses' prayers.

Balaam, according to our Sages, possessed great spiritual powers. In some respects, his spiritual prowess was beyond that of Moses. If G-d would allow Balaam to curse Israel, he would be more than happy to comply. He told the delegation to stay overnight; by morning he expected a Divine communication from G-d.

"Who are these people?" (Numbers, 22:9) asked G-d. Balaam explained to G-d that King Balak wanted him to curse the Israelites so that his forces would be able to defeat them.

G-d's response could not have been more clear: "*Do not go with them! Do not curse the Nation, because it is blessed.*" (Verse 12)

The Torah describes the back-and-forth negotiations between Balaam and the Moabites, as well as between Balaam and G-d. Eventually, G-d permits Balaam to go, but tells him that he may not curse them.

Balaam saddles up his trusty donkey and sets off on his mission to curse Israel. An angel appears in front of him to block the way, but only the donkey sees him. She turns off the road because she can't proceed. After a quick beating from her master, she again tries to walk along the road. This time, the road is

narrow, with a stone wall on either side. Again, the angel blocks the path. With nowhere to go, the donkey turns off the road, smashing Balaam's foot against the wall. More beatings for the donkey. The Torah portion continues with more of Balaam's vain efforts to thwart the Guardian of Israel.

What's with this guy?! He's a sorcerer, the great Midianite prophet! He is "*one who knows the mind of the Supreme One*." (Verse 16) How is it so hard for him to see that G-d doesn't want him to do this?

Rashi explains that it all started with a question. G-d had asked Balaam, "*Who are these people?*"

"Aha!" thought Balaam. "G-d doesn't know everything! He needs to ask me who these people are! If I play my cards right, I'll be able to pull the wool over His eyes and curse His beloved Nation."

Rashi explains in several places that G-d often asks a question as an opening to a conversation. To Adam: "*Where are you?*" (Genesis, 3:9) To Cain: "*Where is your brother Abel?*" (Ibid. 4:9) Here, too, G-d was opening a conversation, but He allowed Balaam to misinterpret the question. In the end, instead of destroying Israel, he destroyed himself.

Some time ago, I came across a reference in the Talmud (Sanhedrin, 105a, cited above) that suggests that the Balaam the Midianite was not a Midianite at all. He was actually a relative of ours. A close relative. He was either a descendant of Laban the Aramite, or perhaps even Laban himself. That would make him either a cousin of Israel or a grandfather of Israel!

I was very surprised to read that. This is amazing. Laban's hatred for his Jewish relatives is well-documented. (See "Watch Out For *What* Car?") What is surprising is the fact that as dishonest as he was, he was usually crafty enough to redefine his lies as truth. For example, he justified tricking Jacob into marrying Leah instead of Rachel (see "To Dream the Impossible Dream") because "... *In our country, it is not done, to give a younger daughter in marriage before the older.*" (Ibid. 29:25) He always defended his treachery by pretending to do what's right.

Here, however, Laban has been caught red-handed. Jacob and Laban had a treaty. They set up a pile of stones and a pillar as a monument to their treaty. Laban designated that pile of stones as a witness. He swore to Jacob that neither he nor his descendants "...*will go beyond this rock pile with bad intentions... May the G-d of Abraham...be our judge,*" (Ibid. 31:52)

Laban/Balaam swore that he would not try to harm us. He designated G-d as a judge over that oath. He set up a stone monument to that oath. However, his hatred toward Israel distorted his judgment and allowed him to think he could fool G-d.

Sometimes we mistake G-d's silence in the face of evil as acquiescence. Laban/Balaam thought he could pull a fast one and get around a treaty. He thought G-d would forget about that pile of stones.

Balaam set off on his donkey to curse Israel. G-d had told him not to curse Israel. G-d knew that Laban had sworn not to pass that stone monument with intentions to harm Israel. But G-d, in Balaam's twisted opinion, was not infallible! He had asked, "Who are these people?" "G-d does NOT know everything," thought Balaam/Laban. I'll break my promise and get away with it."

The *Daas Zekainim* points out that Balaam's donkey was smarter than her owner: *The donkey saw the angel of G-d (blocking the road) and she pressed against the wall, and she pressed Balaam's leg against the wall.* (Numbers, 22:25)

"... *she pressed Balaam's leg against **the wall.***" *The wall.* That stone wall. That same stone wall about which Laban had sworn, so many years before, that he would not "... *go beyond this rock pile with bad intentions.*"

G-d has a very long memory.

Have a great Shabbos Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

© 2010 Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz. Reprint permitted for non-commercial use with attribution to torahtalk.org.