

Weapon of mass DESTRUCTION



It's not just the pen that's mightier than the sword | BY ROBERT SUSSMAN

THE TORAH TELLS US THAT, AFTER THE JEWISH people left Egypt, Balak, the King of the nation of Moav, saw how powerful we had become, crushing other nations, and he was afraid of us. One of the great rules of battle is to “know your enemy”, and Balak was desperate to find a strategy to defeat us. And, as is even the case with the present-day military victories of the Jewish people, Balak and the Moabite people realised¹ that the military victories of the Jewish people were beyond the natural order of the world. There was something bigger going on and they wanted to get to the bottom of it.

The people of Moav knew that the leader of the Jewish people, Moshe Rabbeinu, had spent time in Midian as a young man. So Moav decided to make peace with their arch-enemies, the Midianites, to join forces, and to take counsel from the Midianites regarding what made Moshe so special. They wanted to “know

their enemy” – to try and find out how to fight the Jewish people so they could be victorious over them. Rashi tells us that the Midianites told the Moabites that Moshe had a single strength – and that strength was in his mouth. All the more amazing when we consider that the Torah itself testifies² to Moshe being “heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue”, which some of our Sages understand as being a physical speech impediment.

I admittedly haven't seen it anywhere, but I don't think that it's a big leap to say that the Midianites, amongst whom Moshe dwelled for some 40 years after fleeing Egypt, had surely heard about the Egyptian man who Moshe had killed and

was the very reason for which he had fled to Midian in the first place. The Midrash teaches³ that Moshe killed this Egyptian man by pronouncing one of Hashem's names. We know that Dasam and Aviram – the two men who had witnessed Moshe kill this man and who had threatened to inform Pharaoh about it – made good on their word and did in fact tell Pharaoh, forcing Moshe to run for his life. I think it's reasonable to say that this was the basis for the Midianites telling the Moabites that Moshe's strength was “in his mouth”.

PLAN OF ATTACK

So, what did Balak and his people decide to do after learning this? They decided to find someone to go toe-to-toe with Moshe with the goal of destroying the Jewish people. Who did they seek out to accomplish this feat? An army of mercenaries? A Hercules? A Rambo? None of the above. Instead, they sought someone who also had “strength in his mouth”, someone who had the power to curse, to use his speech as a weapon.

It's a stunning thing if we think about it. Especially if we consider that the back-up plan that the Moabites followed later – causing the men of the Jewish people to sin with the women of Moav, who also encouraged the men to worship idolatry – wound up easily succeeding and resulting in the death of 24 000 Jews!

Clearly, everyone understood the power to curse, to use speech as a weapon, to be superior, or they wouldn't have bothered to use it as their first choice. If your goal is to destroy a nation, to wipe them from the face of the earth, you don't save your nuclear option for last, you use it first. For Balak and the Moabites, the nuclear football amounted to being the mouth of Bilaam. But how can speech be a weapon? Wouldn't Balak and the Moabites have been better off hiring a highly trained and experienced army that had swords and spears and bows?

“THE MIDIANITES TOLD THE MOABITES THAT MOSHE HAD A SINGLE STRENGTH – AND THAT STRENGTH WAS IN HIS MOUTH.”

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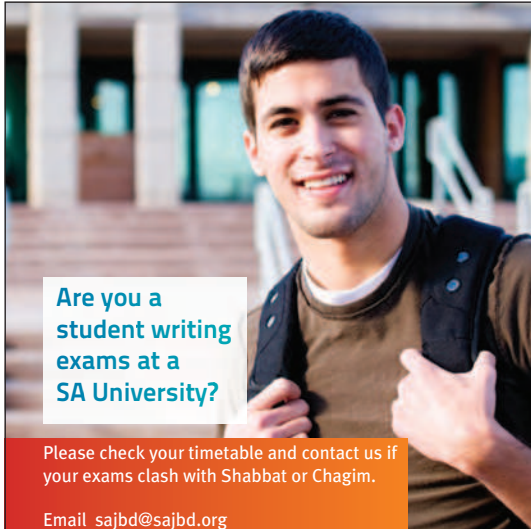
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THE TONGUE IS MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

Mishlei (Proverbs) teaches⁴ us that, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” Our Sages explain⁵ that the tongue has the power to transmit life and death. How so? Divrei Torah (words of Torah) bring life and loshen horah (slander) brings death! For example⁶, all of the difficulties that Yo-sef HaTzaddik (Joseph) went through were because of the loshen horah that he spoke against his brothers.

But how can speech be used to kill? Our Sages teach⁷ on this very same verse from Mishlei: The deeds of the tongue are even greater and more powerful than those of the sword. How can this be so? A man can stand at a tremendous distance from another person and through his tongue alone, he can kill that man. In other words, someone can be in America, 9 000 miles away from us, but with one comment to someone else here, especially in the age of social media, we can destroy that man's business, his family, his life. But a sword, a sword can only kill someone who is within very close proximity to the person who is wielding it. It's for this reason that Hashem created man with two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, but only one mouth – in order to teach that a person should minimise his speech.

them. Not seeing the whole picture is precisely what enables us to jump to the wrong conclusions, to fill in the rest of the picture with negativity and harsh judgments.

I once heard a rabbi tell a story about a time that he was speaking. A couple of young women arrived late and sat at the back. The entire time he was speaking, these young women were talking and gesturing to each other. As the rabbi spoke, he became more and more irritated – and even infuriated – by their behaviour. It was very distracting and quite rude. After he finished, the young women approached him to tell them how much they enjoyed his shiur (class). He couldn't help thinking how insincere they were being and, in fact, what a chutzpah it was for them to pretend that they had heard a single word that he had said. Before he could respond, the spokeswoman for the pair continued to speak and said, “I hope you weren't too distracted by us. My friend is deaf and I was repeating every word you said so she could read my lips, as well as signing here and there, so that she could follow the shiur.”

No matter how good our view is of any given situation, it's always incomplete. We are only seeing a portion of things and not the whole. And we have a choice; we can choose to fill in the missing parts of the picture with negativity and harsh judgments, with curses, or we can choose to get ourselves in the habit of recognising that there is always more to the story than what we see and know, and strive to see things in a positive light. The tongue wields a mighty power and often it's best just to hold it, rather than say something that we'll live to regret. **IL**

FILLING IN THE BLANKS

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenestky points out an incredibly powerful lesson that we can learn from none other than Balak regarding how to be more positive in our outlook and, accordingly, our speech. Balak demonstrates how we can travel down a path of negativity, and, ultimately, even curse others. After Bilaam fails in his first attempt at cursing the Jewish people, Balak instructs him to come with him to another location, from where Bilaam will only be able to see a small portion of the Jewish people, but where he won't be able to see all of us. As a result of not seeing the entire people, Balak explains that Bilaam will be able to curse

¹See Rashi on Bamidbar 22:4, d"eh ehl ziknei midian

²Shemos 4:10

³Shemos Rabbah 1:29

⁴18:21

⁵Metzudas David

⁶Midrash Tanhuma

⁷Orchos Tzadikim 21:7