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*With
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ב"ה

Parshas Balak

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Prayer and the Quantification of Quality

In the long and seemingly never-ending list of murderously villainous Jew-haters, Balak certainly ranks pretty high. The King of Moab made it his supreme mission to annihilate the entire Jewish people: every man, woman and child. He employed horribly evil tactics to ensure our demise. He tried witchcraft. He tried adulterous seduction. He tried using dark magic emanating from the astrological interpretations of the constellations. All to wipe us off the face of the earth. In short, Balak was patently evil for typical Jew-hating standards.

So, it seems rather strange that such a ruthless person would be rewarded by Hashem with a reward so great it is spiritually incalculable. The Gemara (Horios 10b) says that because Balak, in his attempt to beseech Hashem to kill the Jewish people, brought korbanos and passionately pleaded his case before Hashem, he was rewarded with having a granddaughter named Rus, one of the greatest Jewish women of all time and the eventual grandmother of Dovid, the greatest king in the history of our people.

Why would a man who wanted nothing more than to see us all die get rewarded by Hashem for pleading for our deaths?

And this phenomenon isn't limited to Balak. Moshe, while battling the traitorous Korach, davened earnestly to Hashem that He not accept Korach's prayers. Why did Moshe need to ask Hashem not to accept Korach's tefillos? Korach was on a rebellious campaign against Toras Moshe, for which he would end up getting swallowed up by the very earth he was standing on. Hashem considered this movement so bad that He ground the systems of nature to a halt and opened up the earth at its core to swallow the man alive. Why was Moshe concerned about the prayer of a man such as Korach?

We again see this strange phenomenon in parshas Masei. The Torah states that one who murders by accident must run for his life to the ir miklat/city of refuge, lest the victim's relative kill the murderer. The murderer must remain in that ir miklat until the death of the Kohen Gadol, and then and only then may he leave. The Gemara (Makos 11a) says that the mother of the Kohen Gadol would go from time to time to the ir miklat and bring the murderer cookies, in order to lessen the likelihood that he pray for the death of her son the Kohen Gadol. She ensured that his living conditions were comfortable to the point that he wouldn't feel the need to pray for her son's demise.

Now, why would this woman be afraid of the murderer's tefillos? Did she really think that the mighty and holy Kohen Gadol in his full spiritual glory would get affected by some outcast locked up in a prison city for killing someone?

Intercontinental Spiritual Missiles

All these questions point to a powerful answer. All these questions point to the power of an earnest prayer. Prayer uttered in sincerity can turn Hashem away from the stature of the person talking. It can overshadow previous deeds and external scenarios. The passion and meaning injected into those prayers, the fire burning in the soul of the one davening, can pierce the very heavens.

Balak, in a horribly gruesome way, genuinely wanted the Jews out of the way. When he was praying to Hashem and offering Him korbanos, he was doing so with one hundred percent of his heart and his soul. He was as sincere as a man could be. Hence, in a backhanded way, he developed a spiritual connection with Hashem. He was seeking Hashem out. He lifted his eyes towards the sky and relied on Hashem's help. He used every cell in his heart to sincerely plead with Hashem. He raised his arms to Heaven and begged Hashem to help him. Hence, he was rewarded. He recognized Hashem's presence. He understood Hashem's power. He thrust his burden on Hashem and therefore connected himself spiritually to his Creator. He, in turn, merited to have Dovid come out of him: Dovid Hamelech, who would teach the world how to truly connect to Hashem through prayer.

Moshe knew that Korach was wrong. He knew he was power-hungry, misguided, and selfish. He knew that all of Korach's claims were worthless. Yet he also knew that Korach was unquestionably sincere in his prayer to Hashem. That, although making a gross and selfish miscalculation, Korach still poured his heart out to Hashem. His victory over Moshe was such a desperate need that he would plead for it from the depths of his heart. And therefore, Moshe feared

Korach's prayers. He feared that his prayers were so sincere and heartfelt that they might actually be listened to. Moshe, more than anyone, knew the secret of prayer: sincerity. And Korach had lots of it.

A man who, in one grievous moment of error, lost his freedom and is now languishing in a prison city, has one thing that the average person might not have. He has an aching heart that day in and day out pleads with Hashem to save him from his plight. He turns to Hashem every minute of the day with a soul on fire and prays. With nothing else left in his life, the only thing he resorts to is prayer, and therefore, the words that pour out of his mouth ascend straight to the Throne of Hashem.

The Kohen Gadol's mother was acutely aware of this. She was petrified of this. She therefore made it her business to make his life as comfortable as possible, and in turn limit his need to pray for the death of her son. For she knew that if he would, in fact, pray, those prayers would be infused with unimaginable spiritual energy, powerful enough to climb the highest of staircases in Heaven.

There is nothing more cherished by Hashem than the sincere prayer of a soul aflame. Often, pressing and difficult predicaments in life are the ultimate catalyst for lighting the soul on fire. The prayers that such souls exude reach heights that words uttered by others in more calm environments would never reach.

It's easy to stand in shul and daven to Hashem when life is great and you are coasting along. But one runs the risk of having one's prayers ensnared by the dangerous world of monotonous word-uttering, with little to no meaning in the words coming out of one's mouth. Sometimes the greatest match to light those words on fire is a challenge that Hashem places in our lives. Suddenly, daydreaming during prayer is not an option. Suddenly, the welfare of one's life rests on those prayers, and the words take on an entirely new significance. Those words then burst into flames, ascending heavenward.

Nothing is more powerful than the prayers of one in distress. One should not think that one's predicament, history, upbringing or plight will ever hinder the power of those prayers. This parshah proves the very contrary. Those tefillos aren't loved by Hashem despite one's scenario and plight. Those tefillos are loved by Hashem specifically because of it.

Tefillin on Shabbos

My grandfather, Reb Mordechai Glick, a former rabbi, teacher and psychologist, suffered in his later years from a painful case of dementia. Sadly, it was severe enough to prevent him from remembering his grandchildren's names or how to knot a tie, but not severe enough to blind him of the fact that he had the disease in the first place. It pained him deeply. I used to spend Shabbos with him from time to time to keep him and my grandmother company.

One Shabbos afternoon, he came down from his afternoon nap and walked into the kitchen, wishing me a "good morning". He then made himself a cup of coffee and proceeded to put on his tallis and tefillin, and began davening the shacharis prayers for Sunday morning. He swayed and he shuckled, he sang and he cried. He stood firm as a rock while angelically saying Shemoneh Esrei, tears rolling down his cheeks. He prayed for his children and prayed for his former students. He davened for his patients who were often too helpless to daven for themselves. He prayed for Klal Yisrael and for Eretz Yisrael. He davened for all the childless couples that he had helped and all the marriages that he had saved. He davened for all the special needs children in HASC and all the people he knew suffering in psychiatric wards. He thanked Hashem for the wonderful gifts he had and requested that Hashem should give health to his aging mind. With that, he finished his prayer, put away his tallis and tefillin and sat down to read a book.

Did he say the correct tefillah? No. He said shacharis for Sunday instead of minchah for Shabbos. Was he wearing the correct attire? No, he was wearing tefillin on Shabbos when halacha tells us not to. Did his tefillos ride on the wings of angels and pierce the heavens, bringing on heavenly tears? A resounding one hundred percent yes. For those were tefillos of a broken man. Those were tefillos in their most sincere form. Those were tefillos of a man whose entire unadulterated connection to Hashem was wholly infused in those prayers. Such prayers burst through the gates of Heaven and rest at the very feet of Hashem's Throne.

Quality Oil

The Gemara in Shabbos (23a) says that Abayeh originally used sesame oil while lighting his chanukah menorah, for it lasted a long time. One year he saw Reb Yehoshua Ben Levi using olive oil. He explained that although it doesn't last nearly as long as sesame oil, it is still better in the sense that its light is clearer and brighter. Abayeh was inspired and switched to olive oil, which he lit for the rest of his life.

Hashem isn't looking for quantity in prayer. He is looking for quality. Better to use a great flame with a short lifespan than a dull flame that lasts awhile.

The Cardiac Arrest

On May 16th, 2005, my father was walking up a flight of stairs and collapsed. He had a terrifying cardiac arrest and his heart stopped working completely. He was given a five-percent chance of living out the rest of that day. Five. Percent. Chance.

Two weeks later, he was released from the ICU, and days after that, he walked out of the hospital a completely healthy man.

A few days after coming home, he was taking a walk around the block and bumped into our nonobservant Jewish neighbor, who despite being Jewish himself, had less than pleasant views on Jews and Judaism. He ran over to my father and said, "Dr. Eisenberg, you owe me a thanks."

"Why's that?" my father asked.

The man looked at my father with a smile and said, "For it is because of me that you are alive."

"Really!" my father said. "How so?"

The man continued: "When I heard that you collapsed with a cardiac arrest, I whispered a powerful prayer to G-d for your recovery. He must have been so utterly shocked, flabbergasted and surprised that I, of all people, prayed an actual prayer, that He must have answered the prayer. How could He not? And seeing you today alive and well has only confirmed my suspicions that G-d must have listened to my powerful prayer."

Tens of thousands of people davened for my father's recovery. Dozens of Rabbis, Roshei Yeshivah and holy people around the world pounded on Heaven's door on his behalf. Hundreds of thousands of prayers emanating from pure and sacred lips were thrown God's way for him. Yet this nonobservant disgruntled man believed it was his prayer that kept my father alive. Incredible!

What is even more incredible is that the man – might even be right!