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By

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Balak

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Standing on a mountain and gazing down at the Israelite camp from a distance, Bil'am offers magnificent words of blessing and praise. "None has beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither has one seen perverseness in Israel; the Lord his God is with Him...(Bemidbar23:21) How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel (24:5)." Bil'am had come to curse the Israelites, but ended up blessing them for their virtues.

After informing us of Bil'am's lofty praises of Israel, the Torah provides a close up view of the Israelite camp: "...and the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moab. And they called the people unto the sacrifices of their gods; and the people did eat, and bow down to their gods...and the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel (25:1-3)."

Will the real Israel please stand up? Is this a virtuous, righteous nation as described by Bil'am? Or is this a nation engaged in harlotry and idolatry as described in the later passages of this Parasha? The answer: both are true...but only partially true.

Bil'am offered a macro-perspective. A macro-perspective sees the big picture, but does not focus on specific details. From this grand perspective, the Israelites were a blessed nation, beloved by God, characterized by orderliness and righteousness.

The Torah then provided a micro-perspective. A micro-perspective focuses on specific details, but omits the larger picture. It sees every blemish close up. If one looks at an oil painting masterpiece from a proper distance, one experiences its beauty and majesty—but one will not see individual brush strokes. If one looks at the same painting while standing one inch away from it, one will see dabs of paint and some blurred colors, but will not see the picture in its fullness. It is the same painting, but our perspective dramatically affects our reaction to it.

Perhaps the Torah juxtaposes the macro and micro perspectives in order to underscore an important point: life is complex. Each individual, community and nation has its overarching character—which hopefully is marked by idealism and piety; but also has its blemishes and weaknesses. A wise observer must seek to maintain a balanced perspective by keeping both the macro and micro aspects in mind. To see only the virtues and greatness of an individual, community or nation is misguided. To focus only on the sins and errors of an individual, community or nation is wicked.

We who love and respect the State of Israel and all that it means to the Jewish People, are often frustrated and angered by the unfair treatment Israel receives in the political sphere and in much of the media. Even when criticism of Israel may be legitimate, the overall tone of the criticism is not legitimate when the critics only take a micro perspective. They ignore the noble ideals upon which Israel is based; they do not focus on the incredible idealism, righteousness, and fairness that characterize the Israeli nation. They only seem to see flaws, and they magnify these flaws very far out of proportion. Sometimes the micro-perspective stems from ignorance, and sometimes from outright malice. But without the macro-perspective, the true nature of Israel is totally misunderstood and misrepresented.

On the other hand, it is also an error only to take a macro perspective where Israel is absolutely perfect, and to ignore real problems and shortcomings which exist. The test of any individual, community or nation is not to be perfect—since this is a human impossibility. The test is to strive for greatness and to confront problems honestly.

Some years ago, I participated on a panel that dealt with American civilization. One of the panelists spoke bitterly of American shortcomings. He only seemed to be able to see vulgarity, materialism, hedonism, racism, social anomie. Everything was wrong with America. While not discounting the many failings of American society, I reminded this panelist and the audience that the United States is a tremendous experiment in democracy, a monumental advance in human civilization. America is indeed the greatest bastion of freedom, democracy and opportunity in the world. The Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776 changed the course of human history dramatically and very positively. Yes, of course, we must continue to address the flaws in American society, and the American people is blessed with many idealistic citizens who devote their lives to improving our society in every way.

To only see the virtues of individuals, communities or nations is to engage in unhealthy fantasy. To only focus on the flaws of individuals, communities or nations is to engage in destructive misrepresentation of truth. This week's Torah portion provides a vivid reminder to maintain an all-encompassing macro and micro perspective. Our goal must be not to engage in propaganda, but in an honest and sincere search for truth.

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