



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Balak 5771

By Rachel Travis

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A specter of violence and conflict hangs over *Parshat Balak*. Fearing attack by the approaching Israelite nation, Balak, king of Moab, hires the prophet Bilaam to curse the Israelites. Balak entreats Bilaam: “come then, put a curse upon this people for me, since they are too numerous for me... for I know that he whom you bless is blessed indeed, and he whom you curse is cursed.”¹

In Balak’s day, this request was neither metaphorical nor symbolic: his was a society deeply entrenched in sorcery and magic, where benedictions and imprecations were thought to tangibly and powerfully impact the physical world.² Balak’s attempt to curse Israel was therefore a calculated decision with powerful resonance for his people. Understood thus, the nature of his request is striking. Given the option of strengthening his own nation or cursing his rivals, he prefers a malediction.

Throughout history, and certainly in contemporary times, conflict, war and violence—imminent or conjured—drive some leaders to rain “curses” upon others rather than to seek “blessings” for their own people. In particular, in some countries in which violent conflict is occurring, children—who represent the future and are potential sources of individual, communal and national blessings—are sadly becoming vehicles for cursing others. Globally, hundreds of thousands of children have been recruited into governmental forces, paramilitaries, civil militia and an array of other armed groups. International law prohibits the participation of children under eighteen in armed conflict,³ but in certain regions children as young as nine years old have been forced into military service. Envision a fourth grader, lugging a machine gun larger than himself to the front lines. This is happening regularly across the globe, most frequently in Africa, but also in Asian countries and in parts of Latin America, Europe and the Middle East.⁴

Nowhere is this issue currently as acute as in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Over the course of the country’s decades-long civil war—which has continued its brutal course despite peace agreements in 2003 and democratic elections in 2006—armed militias, from all sides, have abducted and forcibly conscripted thousands of children. The magnitude of such abuses is horrifying: children are forced to kill or be killed, are used as sexual slaves, and may face retaliation—or even death—if they attempt to return home. And although DRC’s armed forces claim to have halted child recruitment in 2007, thousands of children are still among their ranks.⁵

Fortunately, there are many people in DRC who refuse to let children continue to be flung at the enemy like curses. In tones reminiscent of God’s refusal to let Bilaam curse the Israelites,⁶ organizations like AJEDI-Ka/Projet Enfants

¹ Bamidbar 22:5-6.

² “Introduction to *Parshat Balak*.” Dr. J H Hertz, ed. *Soncino Chumash*. London: Soncino Press, 1996. p. 668.

³ “Children and Human Rights.” *Amnesty International*. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/children>

⁴ “Some Facts.” Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2007. <http://www.child-soldiers.org/childsoldiers/some-facts>

⁵ Bell, Martin. “Child Alert: Democratic Republic of Congo: Martin Bell Reports on Children Caught in War.” UNICEF, July 2006. p. 4 http://www.unicef.org/childalert/drc/content/Child_Alert_DRC_en.pdf. Also see <http://www.child-soldier.org/child-soldiers-in-drc>

⁶ Each time Bilaam attempted to curse the Israelites, God put words of blessing in his mouth.

Soldats are dedicated to turning youth into conduits of blessings rather than sources of suffering. Based in Uvira, South-Kivu province, AJEDI-Ka works to aid in the demobilization and rehabilitation of child soldiers and helps reintegrate them into their communities. It also seeks legal justice on their behalf. Though the process is fraught with complications—as many children have been sexually exploited, addicted to drugs and physiologically stunted by their experiences—AJEDI-Ka endeavors to provide continuous moral, financial and communal support to help them put down their weapons, overcome trauma and build new lives for themselves.⁷

Like Balak, those who perpetuate violence in DRC have chosen instability over nation building and terror over peace—in other words, curses over blessings. But organizations like AJEDI-Ka are declaring that the people of DRC need not inure themselves to violence and exploitation; that they have the power to follow God’s example in *Parshat Balak* and convert these curses into blessings.

We, as global citizens, have an obligation to play the role that Bilaam the soothsayer would not. Bilaam, as a respected leader, should have warned Balak against his misguided curses. Instead, he eagerly attempted to stoke the flames of conflict.⁸ Though we don’t play a proactive role in the cursing that is taking place in DRC today, we are complicit through our silence. When we learn of curses raining down upon innocents, we have a moral duty to stand up to protect the victims. We need to support the work of organizations like AJEDI-Ka that are toiling to raise international awareness for the plight of child soldiers, so that one day, the people of DRC can live in peace and stability; so that they too may claim for their own the famous blessing that God elicited from Bilaam in place of his intended curse: “How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, and your dwelling places, O Israel.”⁹



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⁷ AJEDI-Ka/Projet Enfants Soldats. <http://www.ajedika.org/>

⁸ S’forno as quoted by the Nachshoni. Rabbi Yehudah Nachshoni. *Studies in the Weekly Parashah*. New York: Artscroll, 1989. p. 1103

⁹ Bamidbar 24:5.

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