

Torah Thoughts Balak

5778:

America's ethnic makeup is changing rapidly. In a few decades, if projections hold, whites will be a minority. That shouldn't trouble us, since America's freedoms and its possibilities are supposed to be available to all of its citizens, regardless of color or religion. The fact that it does bother many people, which is to say whites, is evident when they talk about how neighborhoods change for the worse when a non-white minority begins living in them. It has always made me uncomfortable to hear Jews, especially, talk about 'changing neighborhoods,' in part because of the inherent bigotry of such sentiments, and in part because so often other people have said the same things when Jews moved into non-Jewish places: 'There goes the neighborhood.'

That may be one motivation for the curses that King Balak of Moab wished upon the Israelites in this week's parshah. The weekly reading begins "Balak son of Zippur saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. Moab was alarmed because that people was so numerous." The Israelites had defeated the Amorites in battle at the end of last week's parshah, and this week that outcome alarms the next neighbor over, Moab. Seeing the Israelites move ever closer, King Balak and his people get nervous. But it was not only their presence; note that it is the number of them that give rise to that anxiety. Like the Egyptians who feared the Israelites among them, in part because of how many of them there are, Balak fears a takeover by foreigners, people whose very foreignness is compounded by their numbers.

Fear of the foreign is universal. The Moabites and Egyptians feared the Israelites; American whites have often feared racial minorities, who in turn feared the white majority. Jews have been fearful of many others, often for good reasons. But at some point it must be possible for trust to replace suspicion, to open doors previously closed to the stranger. There may be no more pressing social need in America right now than for respect and civility and between people of vastly different backgrounds. America seems the ideal laboratory for such inter-ethnic and inter-religious compassion, but even here we see how difficult it is to reach that ideal. As we read parshat Balak this week, we should read it as a caution against our own impulse to feel, and say, 'There goes the neighborhood.'