

CNSS

PARSHAT BALAK - 5774

Shabbat Shalom!

This week, once again, has been one of stark and difficult contrasts.

Last motzei Shabbat – Saturday night – as thousands had done the previous week, we got home from shul at almost 11pm and reached impulsively for our mobile phones, our computers, our television remotes – to find out if there had been any news of the 3 kidnapped boys – Naftali Fraenkel, Eyal Yifrach and Gil-Ad She’ar.

With a mixture of emotions, we quickly realised that there was no news – and that no news, in this particular case, was good news; or – at the very least – not bad news.

However, less than two days later, at 6pm Israel time on Monday, the news came through that the three boys had been brutally murdered and their bodies buried haphazardly in a shallow ditch, just south of Hebron.

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The news itself was devastating, but the outpouring of grief and a profound sense of loss pervaded every news outlet from Israel, Facebook pages, Twitter feeds and emails of every sort from multiple angles and a myriad of Jewish communities filled the cloud of communications which seems to envelop our every living, breathing moment on this earth.

There were no end of comments and personal statements, heart-rending cries of sadness, shock, disbelief; some turning to anger, pain and even calls for revenge.

The raw emotional response was understandable and with the advent social media and instant communication, messages to the world are not always filtered.

But the reality is that a tiny fraction of the people who spent those 18 days praying, hoping, yearning, learning, saying Tehillim – Psalms – had actually ever met these boys.

And furthermore, it transpires that the current analysis of all the evidence gleaned from a plethora of sources, places and people and painstakingly and, might I add, lovingly and caringly reconstructed by the Israeli Secret Service, points to the fact that the boys may very well have been killed very close to the time they were actually abducted.

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So the question that screams out at me is simply this: what was the benefit of all those prayers and supplications? In the Halacha, to make an oath over something that can never be, is forbidden. It is known as a Shevu'at Shav – an oath in vain.

How are we, therefore, to view the concept of prayer and supplication in this particular case and what can we draw strength from as we try to digest this tremendous tragedy?

The Babylonian Talmud in tractate Menachot 29b, talks about the tragic death of Rabbi Akiva, one of our greatest sages, who only became a Rabbi around his 40th birthday. Somehow, I feel a kinship with Rabbi Akiva, but only chronologically, you understand.

The Roman government ordered him to stop teaching Torah, on pain of death, and he refused. One of the versions of the story, quoted in the Jerusalem Talmud, is that when Tyrannus Rufus, as he is called in Jewish sources, ordered Akiva's execution, Akiva is said to have recited his prayers calmly, though suffering agonies as a result of the cruel and sadistic torture he was suffering. Noting the extraordinary serenity, Rufus asked him whether he was a sorcerer, since he felt no pain, Akiva replied, "I am no sorcerer; but I rejoice at the opportunity now given to me to love my God 'with all my life,' seeing that I have

hitherto been able to love Him only 'with all my means' and 'with all my might,'" and with the word "One!" he expired.

This is an interpretation of the Shema Yisrael prayer, where we say:

וְאַהֲבָתְךָ, אֵת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ, בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ, וּבְכָל-מְאֹדְךָ.

And you should love the L-rd your G-d, with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might.

In an allegorical aside, the Talmud, back in Menachot, quotes an Aggadata – a story – which describes how Moshe Rabbeinu asked G-d, on being allowed a glimpse into the future and witnessing Rabbi Akiva's extraordinary achievements and cruel death:

“Zu Torah VeZu Sechara?” (This is Torah and this is its reward?)

To which G-d responded, “Shtok!”(Quiet!)

The “Shtok” in this case is not a call to remain uninquisitive or to suppress expression. It is a “shtok” of universal proportions.

G-d is saying, in essence, this particular event, like all events, is woven into the fabric of the cosmos. Your pleading in this regard is not only unhelpful, it could undo the very nature of the universe.

So how do we reconcile this concept with the idea over the High Holidays of “Penitence, Prayer and Charity can avert the Evil Decree”?

From our tragedy we have learned the power of UNITY. Not for many years – some might say ever, in the history of our nation have we ever experienced such a feeling of Achdut – of Unity - amongst our people, worldwide, since perhaps the days of Matan Torah where we responded Na’aseh Ve’nishma, K’ish Echad B’lev Echad.

I believe that had the three boys been alive at the time of our 18 days of Tefillot, G-d could not and would not have ignored the millions of tears and prayers and heartfelt requests. However, if we are to accept, as is the most likely explanation, that they were not alive at that time, it would have been too late – both chronologically and philosophically - for our tears and our Tehilim, for this specific event. As the Mishna in Berachot (54a) states, crying over that which is past has no validity.

But be assured, that the 18 days of tears were not wasted tears.

The 18 days of prayers were not wasted prayers.

Rav Aryeh Levin of Jerusalem said, “After a hundred and twenty years, when we leave this world and ascend to the heavenly tribunal, we will see how meaningful and precious our tears were to G-d. We will discover that the Almighty Himself gathers them and counts every single teardrop and treasures it like a golden gem. And we will discover that, whenever some harsh and evil decree is looming over

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the Jewish people, our tears come and wash away the evil, making it null and void. Even one sincere tear is a source of salvation”.

This concept, I believe with all my heart, is consoling, and comforting!

This is the transition from last week’s sedra to this week’s sedra.

Last week, we read about the Red Heifer, and the esoteric laws of purity and impurity.

These are termed “chukim” or Statutes.

One can search for meaning, one can ascribe meaning, and one can even arrive at an understanding that gives one a sense of calm, but the ultimate reason for their existence is known to the Alm-ghty alone.

This week’s parasha is Balak. As we have seen, a prophet – Bilaam - on par with Moses in terms of his spiritual potential, looks to curse our people. He tries in vain many times, but his words, as guided by G-d himself, become the clarion calls of a Nation who dwells and exists by the Grace of G-d himself.

How Goodly are Thy Tents, O Jacob; Thy Dwelling Places, O Israel.

מה טובו אהליך יעקב, משכנותיך ישראל

And if you look closely at the Parasha, you will see that while all this commotion is going on, Israel is peacefully oblivious to the entire episode.

The prayers and the yearning for our boys, did not bring them back.

But – Yehi Ratson – may the spiritual account that sits in heaven, now holding onto a heavenly endowment of mitzvot and Tefillot, provide comfort and consolation to the entire House of Israel and may we always merit blessing,

and finally, may the Frankel, Yifrach and Sha'er families be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem as they grieve for their sons, but perhaps, just perhaps, feel the warmth and love and power, of the entire House of Israel.

Shabbat Shalom