



# Ohr Yerushalayim News

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## News This Week

### מזל טוב

Mazal Tov to Mr & Mrs David Issler on the birth of a great grandson to Mr & Mrs Moshe Spitzer in Gateshead.

### Children's Shabbos Group

The children's Shabbos group for years 2-4 takes place at 10am

## To Fight The Good Fight

Dani Epstein

It's 2003 in Baghdad, and Mohammed Saeed al-Sahhaf has unwittingly launched himself into a new - albeit brief - career as Comical Ali (a play on Uday Hussein's nickname Chemical Ali), or "Baghdad Bob" as he was known in America. As the face of Saddam Hussein's irrepressible propaganda, he grew to fame for making pronouncements that defied any sort of reality.

"They will all run. The Americans are running. The British are running. They will all commit suicide." And he says all this with a charming smile and a wagging finger. Somehow or another he expects the Iraqi army to defeat B52 bombers with 20mm anti-aircraft guns and F117 stealth fighters with AK-74s. You might as well take on an elephant with a toothpick.

All this hot air came to a rapid end, of course, but not before his grand finale. One of his last public statements on the job included the gem that "there are no American tanks in Baghdad." This astonishing claim was made whilst standing within a few hundred meters of some M1A1 Abrams tanks. Well done him.

Naturally all this bombast hardly changed the course of the war other than providing some much-needed entertainment in an otherwise horrific conflict.

This is a well-honed technique in the Middle East, burying one's head in the sand and proclaiming everything except for the truth, and hoping against all odds to actualise a reality that defies reality. Nasser was pretty good at that as well, proclaiming victory after victory during the Six Day war all over Egyptian radio whilst in reality they were getting the stuffing kicked out of them every which way.

However, this is a relatively recent development. Recent in terms of millennia of course, as unlike in the west, in the Middle East a millennium is a long time in politics.

When the threat of war came to Comical Ali's antecedents, they took a different tack.

"We bet the farm on Sichon and Og, and that clearly did not work. Looks like trouble."

In fact Sichon was the one they really thought would hold off the Bnei Yisroel. Oh, everyone in the region knew about them, that this rag-tag bunch of slaves had broken free - a first in Egyptian history - and they were tramping through the desert. After all, anyone and everyone who had anything of value were heading out to the desert to trade with Bnei Yisroel, so no big secrets there.

But how did they become such an undefeatable fighting force? Sichon wasn't a monkey king sitting on a throne of bananas; bards sung his praises because he had thoroughly routed his enemies and captured their lands (see last week's sedrah). He had serious street cred. He was "the man". And now he had lost everything in one battle in a shocking

## שבעה עשר בתמוז

Ta'anis Starts	1.15am
Shacharis	6.30am / 7.00am / 8.00am
Mincha & Maariv	7.25pm
Ta'anis Ends	10.36pm

turn-around. This turned out to be a wake-up call for the region.

The Abravanel carefully dissects the opening pesukim. "וַיֵּרָא בִלְקָם בְּרִי-אֶתְ" צִפּוֹר", the Torah explains what Bolok saw, which was two things: "אֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאֶמֶר" everything the Bnei Yisroel did to Emor, as well as "וַיִּגַּר מוֹאָב מִפְּנֵי הָעָם מֵאֵד" the defeatist attitude that spread amongst the Moavim once they realised just how grave the situation was.

No matter how bombastic you are, taking a fight to the enemy with an army that has no morale is a suicidal mission. Bolok realised that no one stood a chance in a face-to-face battle.

At this point the picture is quite clear, which begs the question why the next posuk makes an appearance.

וַיֵּאמֶר מוֹאָב אֶל-זִיקְיָי מִדִּיּוֹן עֵתָּה יִלְחָכוּ תְּהַדָּל אֶת-כָּל-סִבְיַתֵּינוּ כְּלַחֲךְ תִּשּׁוּר אֶת-יֶרֶק תִּשְׁדָּה וּבִלְקָם בְּרִצְפּוֹר מִלֶּךְ לְמוֹאָב בֵּעֵת תְּהוּא Moav said to the elders of Midyon: "Now the horde will lick clean everything around us just like an ox does to the grass in a field. Bolok son of Tzipor was the king of Moav at that time."

If anything, the mention of Bolok's position should have taken place at the start of this incident. Tacking it on the end like an afterthought seems completely out of place.

Yet again the Abravanel unravels this mystery. Who exactly approached the elders of Midyon? Was this a diplomatic initiative by Bolok? If yes, why not say so? We therefore must conclude that Bolok had nothing to do with this and it was something that occurred without his blessing or instruction. This is why the posuk says "Moav" approached the "Elders of Midyon", not Bolok and why his position was dropped into the end of the sentence.

## The Week Ahead

### שבת פרשת בלק

Mincha	7.30pm
Candle Lighting	7.53pm-8.00pm
Seder HaLimud	8.40am
Shacharis	9.00am
סוף זמן ק"ש	9.02am
1st Mincha	2.00pm
Ovos uBonim	5.00pm
2nd Mincha	6.00pm
3rd Mincha	9.46pm
Rov's Shiur	Following
Maariv & Motzei Shabbos	10.51pm
Sun	7.15am / 8.20am
Mon / Thurs	6.45am / 7.10am / 8.00am
Wed / Fri	6.45am / 7.20am / 8.00am
Mincha & Maariv	7.45pm
Late Maariv	10.40pm

So now he was facing two issues: one, the monumental defeat of the two most powerful kingdoms in the region; the second one being that his people were running scared and were begging their neighbours to form a coalition without even consulting their king.

This all serves to explain the opening sentence of “וַיִּרְאָה בִּלְקֹם בְּרֵי צַפְנִיר” - this is what Bolok “saw”.

There is something strange, though, about the way the military prowess of Bnei Yisroel is described. Today of course we would talk about them “trashing the place”, “taking them down” and “wholesale destruction” (think carefully about that last one, it’s actually quite funny). The Moavim use a quite different metaphor: “They will lick us clean, like and ox in a field”. Perhaps a little strange, maybe that was a popular turn of phrase in the literature of the times, or is there more to it?

Then there is Bolok’s description of Bnei Yisroel: “הִנֵּה עַם יֹצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם” - הִנֵּה כִּסְּהָ אֶת־עֵינֵי הָאָרֶץ וְהוּא יֵשֵׁב מִמְּלֵי - a nation has left Mitzrayim and covers the land as far as the eye can see, and they are right by my front door.”

Now, if Bolok wanted to alarm anyone to impending doom, he should have included some relevant details such the fact that everyone this nation took on got seriously trashed. Or perhaps the fact that these blokes take on anyone, fear no-one and generally take no prisoners. They fight for keeps, and keeps what they fight for. You get the idea.

Who cares where they come from? Who cares how big the crowd is? If they are rubbish at fighting, then sheer numbers won’t make a huge difference. After all, in 2003 Iraq had roughly 660,000 soldiers versus the 195,000 of the coalition and nothing to show for it at the end of the day.

Here the Abravanel follows his usual route, and carefully circuits round the various midrashim that he occasionally quotes in order to relegate them to “drush”. Not that he dismisses them, of course, but he makes clear that they are not to be taken at face value, and therefore cannot fit into his methodology.

Bolok wished to raise the alarm in a very concise fashion, or more likely the Torah is paraphrasing what he said in a precis, since Bolok probably did not speak Loshon Hakodesh, and his message was probably more verbose and perhaps less delicately phrased.

What was the central issue here, in the message to Bilom? Essentially, Bolok had to justify his approach to Bilom in order to motivate the latter into providing his professional services rather than simply leg it to a beach in Tahiti or Tarshish and retire there.

First there was the background information: “הִנֵּה עַם יֹצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם” - a nation has left Mitzrayim”. This is directly related to the Moavi message to the Elders of Midyon of “עַתָּה יִלְחָכוּ תִּקְהָל” - the nation will now lick us clean”.

The way an ox eats is by ripping out the grass with its tongue, since it does not have upper incisors. They literally “lick clean” the area around them. The message to the Midyonim was that the Bnei Yisroel were not fighting fair, they were using some kind of prayers or incantations in the same way an ox eats with its tongue - a metaphor for speech.

Bolok’s message to Bilom therefore opened in much the same way. “These people have recently left Mitzrayim, the centre of magic and arcane lore. It’s impossible to imagine that they failed to learn anything whilst they were there, and clearly they are using the dark arts to fight their battles, because their success rate is right off the charts. We need someone in the same business, and that’s you, Bilom”.

And that’s where the second issue comes into play. “They have such a big army that combined with their magical prowess they can carry on fighting forever. If they lose a soldier here or there, it makes no difference at all, since they have such a vast reserve. Not only are they powerful fighters, but they have an almost inexhaustible supply of these super-humans. We really don’t stand a chance in conventional combat.”

The urgency of the situation was conveyed with “וְהוּא יֵשֵׁב מִמְּלֵי” - they are on my doorstep”. It’s an existential threat, and I cannot afford to dither, we have to strike now. And if they are here today, tomorrow they will pay you a visit as well.

How do I plan to win them? “וְעַתָּה לְכַהֲנָא אֶרְהִילִי אֶת־תְּעָם תְּהָה” - if you kindly go and curse this lot”, you will weaken their magic, enough to give me a fighting chance so that: “אוּלַּי אוּכַל נְכַהֲבֵי” - I might be able

to defeat them.” You can see how Bolok appreciated how tenuous his position was. Even with Bilom on board with all his magic, Bolok was still uncertain that he stood a real chance of defeating Bnei Yisroel.

Unlike Saddam Hussein’s delusions in defeating a coalition of some of world’s most advanced armies, Bolok was quite aware that this was all a gamble. He had seen what the Bnei Yisroel were capable of, the crushing defeats they laid on to their enemies, he was under no illusion that the odds were in his favour even with Bilom on the team.

With all this in mind, we have to ask ourselves why exactly the Torah retells this history in such detail. Does it really have any relevance to us today? We sadly no longer have neviim, and the nations of the world certainly have none today either.

I can’t claim to have a definitive answer, but certainly there is at a very basic and unsophisticated level a very clear message. At that time the Bnei Yisroel had two things going for them. One, they were keeping the Torah properly and studying it as well. Oh, granted they were not perfect, but their hearts and intentions as well as the majority of their actions were all in the right place.

Secondly, they had a great deal of unity, if not to the degree that they had at Har Sinai - כַּאִישׁ אֶחָד בְּלֵב אֶחָד - one man, one heart. It’s not a far stretch to imagine that even at that point they already had different minhogim. Maybe even different cuisines, fashions and who knows what. All of this is quite natural to the human condition, since we are by our very natures tribal and seek to display our affiliations to that end, whether it is wearing a particular form of headgear, or perhaps a scarf with the colours and iconography of a sporting club that one might favour - or for some inexplicable reason admire - to the extent that one purchases their merchandise in order to furnish them with yet greater hordes of lucre in return for hoping that they will, by dint of one’s pecuniary sacrifices upon their altar, somehow manage to place pneumatically inflated stitched leather patches into a net with a greater frequency than anyone else so inclined.

These two factors - keeping and studying the Torah, as well as unity - were the two prongs of their unfathomable successes in battle.

We can’t expect אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל to all suddenly come to their senses and do likewise. On both sides of the divide there is much blame to be laid. What we however can do is to provide a concrete example of how one ought to behave.

שְׁלִיט”א and under the leadership of our Rov בחסדי השם is certainly a model to be followed. The shiurim on offer have a solid attendance, Torah is learned almost throughout the day in the Beis Hamedrash and shul, and the popularity of the Segways at the Lag Bo’Omer barbeque with young and old certainly indicates a great deal of unity. There is no doubt, however, that if we want to provide our kehillah as a gold standard, we have much work ahead of us.

Given that, we can offer the rest of our nation two concrete points that are highlighted in this week’s sedrah. Firstly, everyone from whatever background can make themselves comfortable in Ohr Yerushalayim. Litvish, Chasidish, Sefardi, Temani, unaffiliated or freestyle (that’s me!) there are no distinctions based on nusach or minhag. This is core to אחדות; do what you do וּבִלְבָד שִׁיכוּן לְבוּ לְשֵׁמִים; how you do it is your business.

Secondly, just because you are a doctor, dentist, baker, rocket scientist or neurosurgeon it does not obviate being a שׁוֹמֵר תּוֹרָה וּמִצְוֹת. Far from it; keeping the Torah can only serve to enhance whatever it is you do, especially if שמירת המצוות is your primary focus.

To this end, if this message is promulgated to our brethren, then the countries that surround Eretz Yisroel today - who’s sole ambition is to see it pushed into the sea - will dread them the way Bolok did. We already saw what the all-too-brief unity of the 18 days those poor boys who were missing wrought. Instead of a Rosh Hashnoh massacre emerging from Hamas’s tunnels, 25% of Gaza’s damage came directly at the hands of Hamas and they were pounded into submission. Just a bit more unity, a bit more Torah, a bit more שמירת המצוות, and then the history of the battles the Bnei Yisroel fought in the desert will appear all the more vivid, since we will witness exactly the same thing all over again.

As I said, this is a very crude and simple take on the parsha, but it is undeniable that this as true today as it was 3,300 years ago.