

Shabbat Parashat Chukat Balak 5786
Curses To Blessings
Rabbi David Englander

This is the Torah reading week when we catch up with Israel, which has been a parashah ahead of us since Shavuot. Since the second day of Shavuot fell on Shabbat, we read the Torah reading for that day of the holiday, while Israel went on to the next regularly scheduled portion, which at that point was Naso.

Only certain parashas are allowed to be doubled up, so this week was the first opportunity to read two. While we read Chukat and Balak in the Diaspora, Israel read just Balak. And starting this afternoon, we will once again all be back together as we read Pinchas.

A particular Israel memory I noticed that I have is actually a false one, as memory sometimes works. I was there some number of years ago, either eight or twelve or even sixteen, and it was during the soccer World Cup. As I remember it, Israel was playing in the World Cup, because there was an absolute national frenzy surrounding this international tournament. Sidewalk cafes had TVs. There was wall-to-wall coverage. Even our guides were sneaking peeks at the broadcasts on their phones.

So I remember it. Except that while the frenzy may have been real, it wasn't because Israel was competing. Israel has qualified for and played in exactly one World Cup, in 1970. Having been born in 1971, that disqualifies me from having witnessed it. Though some of you may recall and can tell me if it was as big a deal then as it would be now.

So how did they do? Well, just making the tournament is an accomplishment, since you have to make it through qualifying against teams that want to be there as much as you do. And the 1970 squad did just that, playing three games in the preliminary stage, the same stage now ending in this year's contest. They did not win a game.

Despite trying to train up to the level of the international stars, including by training at altitude to prepare for the thin mountainous Mexican atmosphere, they lost their first game to Uruguay, 2-0. Down to Sweden 1-0 in their second game, Mordechai Spiegler

evened the score with what was described as a beautiful goal. I even found a transcript of the Israeli radio broadcast's call of that moment, what many still call the most triumphant moment in the history of Israeli sports, though I'm going to guess that Israel's four Summer Olympics gold medals are now competing for that spot. Israel's winter Olympics record remains, understandably, deficient.

That second game ended in a tie, as did their third game against a strong and shocked Italian team, who were held to a 0-0 draw. Italy had even successfully lobbied for a referee to be replaced because his father was Jewish, and they thought he might be biased.

The draw was not enough to get Israel into the next round, but people are still talking about the 1970 tournament and its Israeli hero, the now 81-year-old Spiegler. You might still run into him in Tel Aviv, though if news accounts are right, he sometimes denies he ever played in that game as he does not like to dwell on the past.

When looking into these details, since my memories about Israeli soccer are fuzzy at best and my knowledge of the sport generally is not much better, I found an interesting and telling detail. Israel has played in many international divisions, almost as if world soccer could not quite figure out what to do with them, or perhaps did not want to.

For a time, Israel played in the Oceania division, which contains other Middle Eastern powerhouses such as Fiji, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Tahiti, and Tonga. Israel fits right in, as you can see.

Originally, Israel played in the Asian confederation, but because of boycotts and a motion by Kuwait, they were expelled. Finally, the European region took them in, in 1994, where they have played ever since, trying and not yet succeeding in getting back to another World Cup.

The world not quite knowing how to calibrate its relationship with Israel is not a new idea. The world thinking negative thoughts and acting in biased and uniquely divisive ways toward Israel is not new either.

In Parashat Balak, read both here and in Israel today, we see the story once again of a king who thinks Israel is somehow up to no good. And at that point, all they were doing was traveling through the wilderness on the way to the land they were poised to inherit.

From then until now, individuals and nations have made the mistake of believing that they could and should write Israel's story and decide its fate. At times they have had temporary success, and we had two thousand years of exile to consider the effects of that. Now we live in a miraculous time, with Israel determining its own priorities and its own future, even with the continuation of the historically consistent theme that others often think they know better.

Balaam failed in his mission to curse and thus damage the Israelites, as have so many others who tried, even when they had temporary success. That does not make the story simple. It does not mean every Israeli decision is automatically wise or easy or beyond question. It does not mean they should ignore or quickly turn on relationships that have been, at times, life-sustaining. But it does mean that the Jewish people know something about having others decide they understand how to go about pursuing our future better than we do.

So maybe there is something fitting about this being the week when our Torah readings come back together. We are not in Israel, and the geographical distance is real. But the connection that binds us, and binds our fates, is real too.

We pray that Israel will be guided by strength and wisdom, that its soldiers and civilians will be protected, that its enemies will fail in their stated aims, and that all who live in the region might yet find a way toward something better than endless fear and war.

And maybe we also take some strength from Balaam's accidental blessing. Again and again, what was meant to weaken Israel did not get the final word. May that be true in our time as well. May Israel, still so often misread, challenged, isolated, and judged by others, find its way through today's choppy waters to greater safety, greater peace, and toward a future in which even voices of hostility are turned, once again, toward blessing.