

## Rabbi's Article II

### *A Torah-Portion Called Balak?!<sup>1</sup>*

Being that the names of the Torah-portions were established as a Jewish custom, and (-Menochos 20b, Tosfos d"h Nifsal), "A custom of our fathers (alt. "of Israel") is Torah!" hence, the name of a Torah-portion is Torah. Thus, the question, how can a Torah-portion be named after a wicked person, when Torah-law mandates (-Yoma 38b, founded upon the verse in Proverbs 10:7), "What is the meaning of, 'But the name of the wicked shall rot'? How does a name rot? ...That we do not call others by their names (Rashi: 'A person should name his son after a wicked person')"?!

Additionally, the far more pertinent antagonist in the our Torah-portion is Balaam, and not Balak! Firstly, most of the portion speaks of Balaam's prophesy, and secondly, it is Balaam who brings the greatest of blessings to Israel, including the prophesy concerning our final redemption through Moshiach (-Link)! Why then is the portion named Balak, and not Balaam?

The prohibition, (-Exodus 23:13), "And the name of the gods of others you shall not mention," has an interesting stipulation (-Sanhedrin 63b), "The idols that are written in the Torah are permissible to mention their name." Therefore, maybe we can say the same that the, "We do not call others by their names," does not apply on names of wicked people mentioned in the Torah. However, even so, that there is no prohibition to mention the name, but why purposely select the name of the wicked Balak?

The Tosfos (-Link), on the verse (-Exodus 14:2), "Speak to the Children of Israel... And they camped... In front of 'Baal Tzofin' (the name of an idol in those days)," how can the Torah do this, when the law is (-Sanhedrin, ibid), "It is forbidden for on to say, wait for me at the side of 'idol so-and-so'"? To which Tosafos answers that the prohibition applies only to mankind, but not to G-d. However, upon the rabbis ask, why do the Tosafos need to revert to such an answer when we already have the law, "All the idols that are written in the Torah are permissible to mention their name"? Therefore, we must say that Tosafos sees this rule applicable only for one using the name of an idol in passing, without giving it any 'importance', such as, "wait for me besides 'idol so-and-so'", for by doing this, the idol is being given a 'substance'. Hence, the question because even stronger: Why canonize Balak the wicked with a Torah-portion?!

The answer demands a deeper understanding of Tosfos' answer<sup>2</sup>: *The prohibition does not apply to G-d.* The reason behind the prohibition is in order not to give any 'substance' to the idol. So, what is the difference if this is done by man or by G-d? On the contrary, only upon G-d's speech is it said (-Bereishit Rabba 44:22), "The word of the Holy One, blessed be He, is a deed"! Rabbi Eliezer ben Shmuel of Metz, one of the Tosofos sages, known by his work (Sefer) *Yereim* (-Link) gives us some insight (-Siman 74 [in the *Hasholom* Edition: Simon 245]) on the matter. The reason why, "The idols that are written in the Torah are permissible to mention their name," is because, "Being that Torah mentions it (the idol) definitely it was nullified." The meaning is<sup>3</sup> that the Torah mentions an idol, expressing its 'nothingness', either through a direct statement, such as (-Numbers 21:29), "you are lost, people of Chemosh (Rashi: 'The name of Moab's god')," or by telling us (-ibid 25:3) that because, "Israel became attached to Baal Peor," (-See ibid 25:18) a plague broke out and took the lives of many of Israel. Therefore, the, "Being that Torah mentions it (the idol) definitely it was nullified," by the Jew! This is what the *Yereim* goes on to conclude, "From the very reason ("expressing its 'nothingness'") that the Torah mentions it, we are permitted to mention it," for the Torah accomplished and embedded within the Jew that the idol is absolutely naught, and the Jew is likewise "expressing its 'nothingness'" when mentioning the idol<sup>4</sup>. And with this we can understand the answer to our question, of why would we purposely name a Torah-portion Balak. The Torah-portion is expressing the nullification of Balak's (-Numbers 22:6), "Curse for me this nation," and, "Maybe I will be able to smite them." So too, Israel's naming the portion Balak is to, "express his nullification".

With Balak, not only was his plan nullified, but by Balak hiring Balaam, the Jews received the highest blessings! Nullifying an idol is to completely eradicate its "denial of the oneness of G-d". However, Balak's animosity to Israel, brought to Balaam's trying to, "Curse for me this nation," transforming to ultimate blessings and greatness to Israel! Hence, the portion is named Balak, and not Balaam. This is why it is here that the Torah reveals of the Messianic Era, being that for one of the novelties of the Messianic Era is the transformation of the very nations who ruled over us will (-Isaiah 49:23), "And kings shall be your nursing fathers and their princesses your wet nurses."

1. In *HaKriah V'HaKdusha* (vol?) there is an article explaining the two Torah-portions named after people who weren't good: Korach and Balak. The article there points out that the five people that earned such names (Noach, Yisro & Pinchas) all earned them because they were willing to stand up against everyone for what they believed in, even if what they believed in was wrong. So too, Balak, stood up against Israel in the unprecedented fashion of using the Jewish ammunition of the mouth ("The voice is the voice of Jacob") by hiring Balaam to curse Israel.
2. It isn't probable to say that Tosfos is just blatantly saying that G-d doesn't adhere to his own commandments, being that we are taught (-Shemot Rabba 30:9) on the verse (-Psalms 147:19), "He tells His words to Jacob, His statutes and His judgments to Israel," that "What He does He tells Israel to do and to heed." Hence, we must say that Tosfos is telling us that the core reason for this prohibition isn't applicable to G-d.
3. We can't say that the *Yereim* is speaking historically, that there was no more this idol, for we clearly find the idol *Ba'al Peor* mentioned in our portion, and we find this same idol generations later!
4. Which gives insight to the Talmudic story (-Sanhedrin, ibid) of, "Rava said to him: And where did the Master lodge? Ulla said to him: In Kalnevo (the name of an idol). Rava said to him: But isn't it written: 'And make no mention of the name of the other gods'? Ulla said to him: This is what Rabbi Yochanan said: Any idol that is written in the Torah, it is permitted to mention its name." However, even though it is permitted, but why would Ulla have purposely done so?! The answer is that Ulla, a man who was an embodiment of Torah,, sensing that the world needed a cleansing and nullification of the idol, therefore, he purposely mentioned it, "expressing its 'nothingness'."