

Parsha, Balak, is the 40th torah reading in our yearly cycle and the 7th in the book of Numbers. It's a rich story of curses turned into blessings, and victory for our ancestors through G-d's divine will revealed under memorable and miraculous circumstances.

In today's reading, Balak, the king of Moab, learns that the Israelites have defeated several of his mightiest neighbors and he fears the Moabites will suffer a similar fate. So he retains the powerful prophet/sorcerer Balaam, to curse the Jewish people. But the G-d of Israel appears to Balaam, and tells him not to do the king's bidding, saying "*You shall not curse the people because they are blessed!*". At first the sorcerer agrees, but after a bribe of even greater riches, Balaam petitions our G-d to set out as Balak has asked. This time G-d says okay go, but you will *only* speak the words which I will dictate to you. And it happens that in spite of his best efforts to obey the king, instead of curses, only blessings can come out of Balaam's mouth. Later on in the parsha, Balaam makes prophecies concerning the Messianic redemption of our people. This is one of the tie-ins to today's haftorah selection, which is from the prophet Micah. We will see that Micah directly references the story of Balak and Balaam, and also speaks of the coming of the messiah and the final redemption. Micah also reminds the Israelites that when G-d took them out of Egypt from slavery to freedom, He was also transforming their curse into a blessing.

So Balaam and the Moabite dignitaries set out to accomplish King Balak's mandate to curse the Israelites and keep them from a military victory over Moab. But their journey is interrupted when G-d sends an angel with a drawn sword, to block Balaam's path. While *Balaam* cannot see the angel, his she-donkey can, and

she refuses to move forward. When Balaam strikes her, the donkey miraculously speaks, admonishing her owner for his abuse. Eventually G-d "opens Balaam's eyes," and he finally sees the angel too. The angel chastises Balaam for his behavior toward the donkey, and reminds him to say only what G-d dictates. Balaam continues to Moab where G-d "chances" upon him and dictates the words he will repeat to King Balak: *How can I curse whom G-d has not cursed, and how can I invoke wrath if the Lord has not been angered?*" He ends with a shower of beautiful blessings and praises for Israel.

Twice King Balak tries taking Balaam to different locations with pretty much the same results. After the third time alters are built and offerings to G-d are made, Balaam speaks again and this time he proclaims the lovely and familiar blessing *"How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel! ... G-d, who has brought them out of Egypt with the strength of His loftiness, He shall consume the nations which are His adversaries ... Those who bless [them] shall be blessed, and those who curse [them] shall be cursed."* Balaam issues this blessing as he looks down at the Jewish camps from the heights of Peor, having been struck by their beauty, their modesty, and the way they are positioned which obviously shows the people's respect for one another.

Of course the "goodly tents" of our ancestors, have become the houses of prayer and learning that exist in our Jewish communities today. After twenty-four hundred years we still commune with our G-d, the same G-d, in our houses of prayer, and study Torah in our houses of learning. This room is our "goodly tent", the manifestation of the ancient blessing in today's parsha. It has been said that this blessing of communal prayer will restore all other blessings to us.

After Balaam fails three times to curse the Jews, King Balak angrily sends the prophet away. But for his own gain, before he goes, Balaam offers advice about how to accomplish a downfall of Israel: *Lead the men lead into harlotry with the women of Moab*. Unfortunately this works. Moabite and Midianite women seduce some of the Jewish men and entice them to worship a deviant deity. G-d then commands Moses, who plays a relatively small role in this parsha, to execute the guilty parties and a plague erupts among the Israelites. When a Jewish leader publicly flaunts his Midianite princess, both are killed by a zealot named Pinchas. The plague is halted, but not before it causes 24,000 deaths. This brings us to the end of the parsha and to some thoughts that are relevant for us in our time.

It's interesting to appreciate the flow of the parshiot one week to another, realizing that the entire torah is really one 52 chapter-long story. I was thinking about this when I came across a bit of known history regarding this reading. When the children of Israel first went down to Egypt in the time of Jacob, they were a small group of seventy souls. After more than 212 years of slavery in Egypt, G-d had Moses lead them out of Egypt and out of slavery. By the time they left Egypt, the seventy had grown to over six hundred thousand despite the hardships they endured. But slavery had taken its toll: the people were weak, dispirited, tired, and worn out from all the hard years. As slaves they were forced to be obedient to their masters. It must have been difficult for them early on to exercise adult judgment and free will. Yet, despite their weakened condition, they now managed to militarily defeat three very powerful foreign countries (*Canaan, Emor, and Bashan*)

We know that Balak was the king of Moab and that Moab was considered to be the fourth most powerful country in the area. Our sages explain that Balak, an ordinary person inciting his people against the Israelites, frightened them, and then gained enough followers to be made king. As king, he realized that the Israelites were winning their battles not by brute strength, but by something else. He understood that the "something else" was the power of G-d, exerted through their leader Moses, observing that the Israelites depended on *spiritual* power rather than the power of the sword. This was evident in Moses' leadership style, in that he spoke to the people, transmitting to them the word of G-d. Balaam was a master magician and sorcerer who practiced black magic, although he is also referred to as a prophet because G-d did speak to him. Balak saw how the Israelites won their wars, and he tried to mimic it. Since the Israelites were led to victory by a man connected to G-d, Balak reasoned that if he could also obtain the services of a man connected to G-d, he would defeat the Israelites. This must be one of the earliest examples of our people fulfilling the commandment, with G-d's help, to be a light unto the nations...victory not by sword but by spiritual power.

One of the most important teachings of this parsha, and one that that we can all relate, is a focus on the *awesome* power of human speech. Unfortunately, it is easy to take this gift of free will for granted or to exercise it carelessly. Today's parsha centers around it. Balak orders Balaam to utter curses; but because he pronounces blessings, everything is changed. The power of speech is transformative. It's interesting that in this parsha, our G-d who spoke to only a select few of our own actual ancestors, actually speaks to a non-Jewish sorcerer, an extremely unusual occurrence. This communication results in miracles. Then

there is the donkey's ability to talk, only the second time G-d empowers an animal speak in the torah, the first being when the serpent speaks with Eve in the garden of Eden.

Words matter. They can have long-lasting, even eternal results. The parsha teaches us over and over again about the enormity of the power of speech. We are reminded that while there is tremendous good to be imparted through generous, kind and supportive speech, there is also no limit to the amount of damage one can do through thoughtless speech. Evil or hurtful words cannot be recaptured or undone. There is a quote by the Dalai Lama that I especially like and have hanging in my kitchen. It says: One, be kind whenever possible and two, It is *always* possible. The next time any of are feeling angry, hurt or afraid enough to want to offer an unkind comment, maybe we will remember this parsha and use our voice to transform curse into blessing, unkindness into compassion, and pettiness into empowerment.

Today's parsha also demonstrates that greatness, or blessing, can come even from something that starts out very badly and in this I think there is great hope. The Talmud relates that the Biblical figure Ruth, who transformed her own life by converting to Judaism, was a direct descendant of King Balak. Ruth was also the great-grandmother of King David, Therefore, the Moshiach, who will usher in the era of ultimate transformation and blessing through the redemption of the Jews and the world, would appear to be a direct descendant of the king who tried so hard to annihilate us with his curse. Doesn't Judaism teach in the blackest darkness there is always a light...hope in the face of despair? It's comforting to remember that what feels like a breakdown is often a prelude to a breakthrough.

What seems like a curse can quickly transform to blessing. We have a term for that : “a blessing in disguise”.

In ending, I want to say I am really grateful for the gift of free speech and the fact that when I open my mouth what I *mean* to say is usually what come out. And if not exactly how I meant to say it, I can use my words to clarify. With that gift I accept the responsibility to use words that empower, support and bring blessing into the world. Who am I to judge another when it is so likely that, given his or her exact circumstances, I might have done exactly as they did? When I think of blessings and curses I think of the cartoon where an angel is on one shoulder and a devil on the other and the person is torn between who to listen to. I pray I will always be able to discern which voice is the devil and turn toward the other side. To me this means striving to be my best self and helping others to do the same by using words and ideas that create space, joy and understanding. Scientists tell us that what we say has the ability to change the quality of our lives. A declaration that it’s going to be a great day!, the words “I think I can!”, a simple “Thank you for being such a good friend” is likely to lead to a good day, the confidence to succeed and a loyal relationship. We are all capable of choosing the words that we will live by. While we have both the power to bless and to curse within us, I pray that, with G-d’s help, we will each choose only the blessings to hold in our hearts and to pass through our lips.

Shabbat Shalom.

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