

Summer Sermon - Balak

Shabbat Shalom!

When our Rabbi asked me to participate in a summer sermon series, I replied that I dislike public speaking. Then I did what any proud Jewish wife would do, I suggested he would ask my husband. The Rabbi said: "Let's talk in a couple of weeks." I shrugged and thought "No way". I was also intrigued and could not stop thinking about what would my message be.

I chose Torah portion Balak for my sermon because this portion focuses on transformation, turning darkness into light, curses into blessings. Starting with the fact that it is named after an evil king of Moab who feels threatened by the recent victories of the Israelites over the neighboring nations. Moabites form an alliance with Midianites and hire a powerful prophet Balaam to curse the Jewish people. Balaam's curses are miraculously transformed by G-d to some of the greatest blessings that the Jewish People received. The message of transformation and redemption continues with Balaam's prophetic vision of the end of days and coming of the Messiah.

The English word "messiah" means "the promised deliverer" or a "leader or savior." The more accurate translation of "moshiah" from Hebrew is "anointed". Since belief in the coming of Messiah is central to Judaism, but is not commonly discussed topic, I want to concentrate on this part of the Balaam's prophecy.

In Numbers 24:17 Balaam said:

“I see it, but not now;

I behold it, but not soon.

A star has gone forth from Jacob,

And a staff will arise from Israel

Which will crush the princes of Moab

And uproot all the sons of Seth.”

Interestingly, Balaam prophesizes about not one, but two Messiahs: the first one - King David, and the second - a direct descendant of the Davidic dynasty.

According to Rambam,

“I see it, but not now,” refers to King David.

“I behold it, but not soon” is about the Messiah.

“A star has gone forth from Jacob,” is King David, and

“A staff shall arise from Israel,” refers to the Messiah.

The Messiah will rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, gather the Jews from all over the world and bring them back to the Land of Israel. The Messiah will also perfect the entire world and bring all people to serve G-d. “For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of G-d as the waters cover the sea.” (Isaiah 11:9)

After reviewing this week's Torah portion, I started to wonder whether prophecies have any relevance in our lives. Imagine my surprise, when I realized while writing this speech that my family's move to America in 1991 also started with a prophecy. In our case, it was a prophecy made by my great-grandmother, a deeply religious woman who studied Torah and Kabbalah, after whom I was named Polina. Years earlier, it must have been in the 1960s, she predicted that one day when a man with a spot on his face will come to power, the Soviet Union will fall apart and our family will move across the ocean. Some of you may remember that the exodus of the Soviet Jewry started during "perestroika," a period of restructuring when Mikhail Gorbachev, a Soviet leader with a large birthmark on his forehead, came to power.

In his book "To Heal A Fractured World," Rabbi Jonathan Sacks tells a story of a chassid summoning the courage to ask the Rebbe why does the Messiah not come.

"Why do you ask, my son?"

"Because," the chassid replied, "in the past perhaps we were not ready. The world was not ready. The hour was not right. But now, after the Holocaust and the return of Jews to their land, has the time not come?"

"I will tell you a great secret," the Rebbe whispered. "It is not we who are waiting for the Messiah. It is the Messiah who is waiting for us."

So, what can we do to get ready for the Messiah to come? Even better, what should we do?

An answer to these questions is provided in this week's Haftorah portion when the Jewish people ask prophet Micah for guidance on how to serve G-d. The prophet reminds them of the Torah and its mitzvot: "He has told you, O man, what is good, and what G-d demands of you: but to do justice, love kindness, and walk discreetly with your G-d." (Micah 6:8)

If you are like me, you might be thinking: "How do I do what G-d demands of me?"

Sometimes I have a hard time making healthy food choices or matching my clothes.

There are 613 commandments, I may name or do a few dozen only. I am no Abraham, Jacob, Moses, or Rabbi Hillel. What should I, an ordinary Jew living in suburban Michigan, do?"

According to the late Victor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor and an author of the book "Man's Search For Meaning," each of us has unique skills, abilities, or talents. For each of us there is a task only we can do, a fragment of light only we can redeem, an act of kindness or generosity only we can perform, a mission only we can complete.

We do not need to be patriarchs or matriarchs, prophets, or famous rabbis. Their roles are taken, and we have our own roles to play. Rambam taught 800 years ago: "See yourself as though the entire world is held in balance, and any one deed you do could tip the scales for you and the entire world to the good."

So, let's tip the scales for the good, because we are right here, right now, and we have our unique gifts to do that. Let's study Torah and say blessings. Let's raise our children to behave like mensches and call our parents. Let's light Shabbat candles and celebrate the holidays. Let's visit the sick and help the needy. Let's take a walk and thank G-d for a beautiful world that He created for us. Let's be more compassionate, patient, and generous. Let's smile and say hello to our neighbors.

I strongly believe that each of us, with G-d's help, our family support, and an effort can transform the darkness and shine our goodness and unique light. My grandmother used to say: "Each day is a gift. Use it well!" What are you waiting for?

Thank you for listening to my speech. Writing it was a wonderful learning and growing experience. Maybe one day, you too will participate in a summer sermon series yourselves. Shabbat Shalom!