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Kol Rinah  
Parashat Balak  
July 20, 2019 / 17 Tammuz 5779

“Love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Dt. 10:19). This commandment, or its various forms appears, in the Torah thirty-six times. Thirty-six times we are commanded, in various forms, to love and care for the stranger, the poor, the widow, the orphan. This is the mitzvah, the commandment that is repeated more than any other. Because it’s the hardest or because it’s the most important? Both, I would say.

More than anything, I am convinced that the Torah is about teaching us to be kind. And especially about teaching us to be kind to the people to whom it’s less easy to be kind—the other, the stranger.

Rabbi Shai Held, who was here this past fall, wrote recently, “[T]he Bible cannot inform us precisely what legal protections are needed to prevent the exploitation of the vulnerable in our times, but it can tell us-- if we listen to it, it *does* tell us-- that who we are as a society depends to a great extent on how we answer that question. Countless biblical laws aim to assure that people living on the margins of society-- the destitute, the downtrodden, the unprotected and unregarded--are able to partake of the blessings God makes available to society at large. The Bible offers no more forceful message than this one: people on the margins matter, and their wellbeing is the responsibility of each of us, and of all of us. What this should mean concretely in our times is open to debate (provided the debate takes place in good faith, with the interests of the powerless rather than the powerful in mind), but the fundamental commitment is not.”

God’s most important message for us is to love the stranger, the vulnerable, the widow, the orphan. We’re commanded once to love our neighbors. Because our neighbors, so often, too often, are like us. And it’s relatively easy to love and care for people who are us, like us, in our community, who we understand, who we know. But to love the stranger, to love the person who is to us other—that’s not easy.

So how does the Torah go about trying to get us to do this? Well, by telling us over and over and over again. But also by endless exercises in empathy, in helping us to see the perspective of the other. From Genesis to Exodus to Numbers to Deuteronomy, the stories and laws are about people who are not the popular kids, not the prom queens and kings, but the imperfect, the less-loved, the weaker, the oppressed, the poor. And we learn about people who make mistakes, who are broken in so many ways.

To read Torah is to read and make heard stories and rules that lift up the other. To study and learn Torah is to discern the nuances of how we best lift up the other. To live Torah, to live a life of Torah, a life dedicated to Torah, is to live for lifting up the other.

It’s hard to love the stranger though. It’s hard to lift up the other. We’ve heard that they are dangerous. They’re bad people. There are so many of them. And they’re going to take from us everything we have, everything we value.

Coincidentally or not, that is exactly what the nation of Moav says about the Israelites at the beginning of our parasha. “Moav was alarmed because that people [the Israelites] were so numerous. Moav dreaded the Israelites, and said..., ‘Now this horde will lick clean all this about

us as an ox licks up the grass of the field” (Numbers 22:3-4). That is to say, this horde will take our jobs, our land, our crops, our food, our homes, our lives. (The Hebrew word “horde” translates is *kahal*, community.)

And Balak, King of Moav, acts on these populist fears. He tries to hire Bilaam, a prophet, to curse the Israelites. But God thwarts this plan by making not curse but blessing emerge from Bilaam’s lips. On the one hand, this a reassuring act of God caring for Israel, who in this story is the other in the eyes of Moav. God is modeling what it means to care for the people who are treated as strangers, and thus feared and hated. But on a deeper level, God is telling the Moabites, the “oppressors,” that these people who you fear, they are really a blessing. And perhaps even more important, I, God, am on the side of the stranger. If you won’t bless, then I will.

The Torah, however, is not asking us to be wimpy, or weak. When the Torah recognizes other particular groups as a danger to us, the Torah, in ways that make me squeamish and uncomfortable, prescribes eradication. There are people who are coming to get us, explicitly, or insidiously. But they are not the ones who are coming as strangers, who are vulnerable, and weak, and oppressed. And the Torah is about learning to tell the difference between the stranger trying to subvert and sabotage us, and the stranger coming for safety and support.

God calls us to welcome the stranger. Nowadays, God doesn’t speak directly to us as God did to Moses, and nor even does God speak directly through us as God does with Bilaam. Rather, God has taught us the words, the thoughts, the actions, the kindness, and the love that God expects us to enact. God won’t do it God’s self. When we open our mouths to speak to and about those who are to us other, let not curses come forth, but may blessings of the other flow. May the arms with which we welcome the stranger be not loaded and aimed, but open and embracing. And may our eyes, and our hearts, see the most vulnerable not as curses, but as blessings.