

Making Sacred that which was Unholy

When the State of Virginia joined the Confederacy in May 1861, Union troops took over the plantation owned by Robert E. Lee's family. Lee was both a strong defender of slavery and notoriously abusive of his slaves. From its position just across the Potomac River, the plantation had a militarily strategic view of Washington DC and the Union naturally wanted to control it. When Colonel Lee shockingly quit the US Army and abandoned the Union in order to become the Commander of the Virginian Confederate troops, Union troops immediately took over the plantation and freed the slaves. Eventually Lee became a General and then Commander-in-Chief of all the Confederate Army.

In May 1864, more than a year after President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln approved using the plantation as a burial ground for Union soldiers. Also constructed on Lee's former acreage, was Freedman's Village, a place where some 1,500 freed slaves could settle. The village was built with schools, homes, and churches so the former slaves could build a new and blessed life.

In time, Lee's plantation and mansion became Arlington National Cemetery, one of the most revered and sacred sites in this nation. Lee's plantation was transformed from a place of slavery and rebellion to a village for freed slaves and a sacred burial ground that honors this nation's heroes.

This transformation was first role-modeled in a remarkable passage in this week's Torah portions. We read a "double" Torah portion this week, *Chukat* (Numbers 19:1-22:1) and *Balak* (Numbers 22:2-25:9). The Children of Israel, 40 years after the Exodus and fleeing Egyptian slavery, are finally at the doorstep of the Promised Land. Balak, King of Moab, hires the prophet Bilaam to curse the Israelites. Bilaam is a real prophet; he has the spiritual insight and strength with which to connect with God. And yet, he sells out his spiritual talent to the highest bidder and is even willing to use it for curses and oppression. But when he tries to curse Israel, time and again his curses are turned into blessings. Until finally, he utters words that we still sing when we enter a synagogue:

*Mah tovu ohalekha Yaakov, misk'notekha, Yisrael.
How good are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel* (Num. 24:5).

Bilaam concludes his song by saying: “*Blessed are they who bless you, accursed they who curse you!*” (Num. 24:9).

We do not need to be reminded that there is evil in this world. We all are well aware that talented people can choose to lend their skills and power to those bent on destruction, oppression, and injustice. History has compiled a long list of scholars and those of power and influence who have chosen to join the forces of bigotry, racism and anti-Semitism. However, the Torah reminds us that God has given us the power to turn evil and curses into blessings. We can, we have, and we must continue to turn that which is unholy into something that which is holy and nurtures life.

B'vrakhah

Rick

Rabbi Rick Rheins