

**A Drashah for Parashat Balak**  
**July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014**  
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Perhaps you have been planning a vacation this summer: you google map your trip, book the hotel or cottage, eagerly anticipate your getaway, ... and off you go! But, surprise! There's a detour, a backup, or your car breaks down. Or, when you arrive at the cottage, it doesn't look a bit like the online photos! Or, you realize you left your much-needed suitcase on your front steps of your house! Or, it rains all week!

Or maybe, before you even leave for your trip, your back starts hurting – after all, you have been lifting heavy boxes recently, it *must* be that ... but the pain doesn't go away; you quickly head off to your doctor, expecting to get a script for pain relievers, or physical therapy, and come out with appointments for MRI's, CT scans, and a frightening diagnosis.

Life is full of surprises, good, bad and otherwise. “We make plans,” as the saying goes, “and G-d laughs.” And yet, as each of us is born “*b'tzelem Elohim*,” “in the Image of G-d,” each of us is born with innate WISDOM, WARMTH and OPENNESS, how DO we manage to tap into these attributes when life takes a turn we don't expect? How can we **uncover**, **discover**, **recover** the parts of us that feel distant, dormant or even lost?

Our Torah portion today, Balak, is about starting out one way and ending up another. The story is familiar; Balak, the Moabite king, feels threatened by the Israelites, and so summons a well-known seer, Bilaam, to curse the Israelites.

Balaam does his best to do so, but is thwarted over and over again. He repeatedly beats the ass that he is riding on, because the *aton*, the ass, refuses to go forward, and even speaks to him! In true folktale tradition! And, then, even more surprising perhaps, is that an angel of G-d speaks to Balaam, a non-Israelite! This journey is not what Balaam expected. However, after a few attempts to make it be what he thought it would be, he finally becomes open, and receptive to hearing the words of G-d! While fully intending to curse the Israelites, he now finds himself looking down over the Israelite camp and blessing them with the beautiful words,



“*Ma Tovu, ohalechah Yaakov, Mishkinotechach, Yisrael*”. “How goodly are your camps, Jacob; how goodly are your sanctuaries, Israel.”

Let me give you an earlier example from Torah: Jacob, Yaakov, whose name means “crooked,” who started out his life holding on to the heel of his twin brother, Esau-- this Yaakov, who deceptively steals the birthright from Esau, he is transformed, through his struggle with the Divine, into *Yisrael*, Israel, the one who wrestles with an angel of G-d. “Struggling” is another way of saying “searching, asking questions, wrestling with what appears to be true.”

Yaakov, Jacob, learns his life lessons from deceiving his father, falling in love, being deceived by his father-in-law, suffering loss and despair, feeling hopeless at times, yet feeling connected to G-d while regaining solace and comfort in his old age. Despite, or because of all of this, he was able to live his life with meaning and faith, and he was able to impart to his children a legacy of continuity and spirituality. His life unfolded not in a straight line, but rather it meandered from one path, at times quite crooked, to another.

Let me give you a modern-day example: My *shomeret Shabbat*, single, attractive, smart, and wonderful younger sister, adhering to our Orthodox upbringing, had joined Chabad when she moved to Natick. When our father died, she started to say Kaddish for him; however, she was asked not to do so as she was a woman. “Only men are allowed to recite Kaddish,” she was told.

This was very sad and painful for her. I was incensed. “I will go with you the first time to the Conservative Shul, Temple Israel; then you need to go six more times in a row, say Kaddish, and see how you feel.” She, as all younger siblings should, listened to her older sister. We went, then she went, she kept going ... she became a regular, started davening there, got very involved in the shul, and ... she met the wonderful man that she will be marrying sometime in the next year ... and at 59 years old, she will be getting married for the first time! And all because she allowed herself to be open to the struggle—of wrestling with her despair, of yearning to pay tribute to our late father, of wanting, in her heart, to utter those words in community, in a minyan out loud. “*Yitgadal viYitkadash*” ... she allowed herself to uncover, discover, recover what was in her heart and soul, her *neshamah*.

What can we learn from this? There is a transformative power of the Holy, the Awesome, the Divine, that takes us from the *Ohel*, the tent, that is impermanent, sometimes flimsy, can be blown over and yet, we erect it as we do the Sukkah each year, open to possibilities, open to the Heavens, and it connects us to the *Mishkan*,

the Holy, that dwells within each of us ... if only we are receptive to it. Yes, we all have our “crooked” moments—perhaps many crooked moments—but if we engage in the struggle of letting ourselves be touched by the Holy, of searching deeply about what matters in life, of letting ourselves be open to change, to discovery, we may be surprised by what we find, what comes out of our mouth, and how we act.

In conclusion, I would ask you all to sing a version of *Ma Tovvu* that I learned at a Jewish Spirituality course several years ago. The tune is different from what you may be familiar with. You may know that this is the song we sing when we enter a sanctuary, a Holy Place, in preparation for prayer. We have been praying already this morning, we will be praying more before our service is over; perhaps you will allow yourself to deepen your *Kavanah*, your intention.

Here are the instructions: the first time, we will sing the words as they appear in the Torah: *Ma Tovvu, ohalechah Yaakov, Mishkinotechah Yisrael, Ma Tovvu, ohalechah Yaakov, Mishkinotechah, Yisrael*. The second time we sing this, I will ask you to substitute one of your parent’s or one of your ancestor’s Hebrew/Yiddish name for the “Yaakov” and your name for the “Yisrael”. If you choose not your actual parent, then choose someone who guided you with loving kindness. And perhaps you will note the transformation from the generation above you TO you. We will sing this two times, the second time you might like to include another parent or person who guided you with love. The third time we sing this, you will put YOUR name in the “Yaakov” space, and your child, nephew, niece, grandchild, a descendant that YOU are giving love and guidance to in the “Yisrael” slot. And perhaps noting your intention to have that next generation, your child, grandchild, whomever, to be a better iteration of you ... to be a “transformed” you. I will cue you each time we make the switch; finally, we will go back to the original. From “Yaakov”, crooked, to “Yisrael”, one who struggles, asks questions, searches....

WE are so much more than Yaakov, we can all BE Yisrael .... From Ohel, “tent,” to Mishkan, “Sanctuary;” the place where G-d is close by, G-d dwells within ... because, after all, we are all B’tzelem Elohim, in the image of G-d!

Now for the song:

May we all be open to uncovering, discovering, recovering all that is Holy in each one of us!

*Shabbat Shalom!*