

Balak
June 22, 2013
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This week's Torah Portion is *Balak* -it contains the fascinating episode of the Prophet *Bilaam* who is frequently remembered for his talking donkey more than for any words he himself uttered. *Bilaam* was believed to possess special prophetic powers. As *Balak*, the king of Moab, said to him: "I know that whomever you bless is blessed, and whomever you curse is cursed." And since King *Balak* dreaded the alleged military might of the approaching Israelites, he hired *Bilaam* to put the curse on them. Much to *Balak's* dismay, however, he who came to curse remained to bless.

Bilaam's praise borders on the rhapsodic, and in a burst of admiration which has become familiar to most of us as the very first words of prayer we utter whenever we enter the synagogue, *Bilaam* exclaims: "*Ma Tovu Ohalecha Yaakov Mishkenotecha Yisrael*" "How beautiful are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings O Israel."

Now how exactly did this transformation take place? How did the man who was specifically hired, and paid quite handsomely, to *curse* Israel - end up blessing them?

The traditional Jewish answer is that God changed his curses into blessings. But my question this morning is how? How does God work in and through us? What was the exact nature of *Bilaam's* transformation?

A clue to the mysterious change that transformed *Bilaam* can, I believe, be found in a close reading of the Torah text itself. You may recall that *Bilaam* does not utter a single kind word about Israel *until* he climbs the mountain and from the heights looks down upon the whole of the people of Israel, encamped on the plains below: "*Ki Meyrosh Tzurim erehna, umigevaot ashurehnu*", "From the top of the cliffs I see them and from the hills I behold them." Hmm. Could it be that the very process of viewing the Israelites from the mountain peak helped to transform this pygmy of a fortune teller into a giant of prophecy?

I would like to suggest to you that is precisely the case. In life there are two distinct attitudes and perspectives one can embrace. We can take the "mountain-view" or the "valley-view". And the world looks very different depending upon whether you are viewing it from the depths of the valley or from the tops of the mountains.

Boy scouts are taught: when you are lost in a forest, climb the nearest hill. From this high vantage point, you will have a better chance to plan your way out to a clearing. In life, too, we often get lost. We often get caught up in the valley thickets, we are too often tempted to lose sight of the forest for the trees. Such moments demand a new perspective that only the mountains can give us.

As a rabbi I meet such people every day. People who get so caught up in the mundane challenges of every day life, the petty aggravations and disappointments that are unavoidable in living. We laugh when we hear a child say: "if I don't get that toy I'll just die!" But we don't hear ourselves when we as adults say: "if I don't get that new car, or that job promotion, I'll die!" Much of our life is lived in the valley of every day living, and it is quite a challenge not to lose perspective.

Two thousand years ago when the great Hillel was asked to summarize the entire Torah while standing on one foot he uttered the essence of Judaism by paraphrasing the verse

from Leviticus 19:18- "*V'ahavta l'reyecha kemocha*" "Love your neighbor as yourself" - unfortunately he never told us how to "love one's neighbors" – a feat much simpler to challenge than to do. In *Bilaam's* blessing we may see the secret to achieving this most difficult of life's challenges. How in fact does one go about "loving one's neighbor?" I have found that when we look at people and situations from the low-valleys of our customary self-centeredness we tend to suspect them, to fear them, even to curse them. Why? Because we see only a part of them, a part we may not wholly understand or appreciate.

But, when we rise up to the mountain-view, as it were, seeing our problems, seeing others from a higher plane, as God might see them, then we gain a much different perspective- we see a larger picture. We come to understand and appreciate situations and individuals who only seconds before were a source of pain and aggravation. We can now see that they actually have fine qualities that do not meet the eye upon superficial examination. And result of our new perspective is that instead of fear and suspicion, we are moved to compassion and perhaps even to love.

As the late Rabbi Milton Steinberg put it: Too often in life: "We find ourselves in a jungle of emotions, baffled in an underbrush of problems..." Too often, "we fail to see the forest for the trees...Lost human souls in the wilderness of life need mountaintops if we are to recover our perspective."

How many times do I speak to parents in the final days or weeks before a major life event, as they rush to prepare for an approaching wedding or Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Think back in your own lives to those great moments as you found yourselves in the days and weeks leading up to the special day. And so often what I hear is a sense of frustration and panic. The arrangements become overwhelming, there is so much to do and so little time to do it. It is not uncommon for people to say to me: "I can't wait till this Bar Mitzvah is over, or the wedding is over." This great moment has become a burden and aggravation. How did this happen? How did a great moment of *simcha* and celebration all of a sudden become such an enormous burden?

Simply put – you are in the valley when you should be standing on top of the mountain. A Bar Mitzvah or a wedding is ultimately not about parties or arrangements, guests or caterers or photographers. It is about a child, a young boy who is becoming a man. A young woman about to take her place under her chupah. It is about the miracle of life and health, of growth and maturity; it is about time and the passing of time, it is about fulfillment and it is about joy and it is about gratitude. When you stand in the valley you see only the challenges of the moment – but my, how different things look, when we are able to leave the valley concerns behind and climb to the mountains of exultation.

In some sense I see this as my job – my role as the rabbi at your wedding or Bar Mitzvah. Not only to perform the ceremony, not only to pronounce you husband and wife – or a man – but to challenge you to move out of the valley of the mundane and climb to the mountain of perspective to rejoice in the true miracle of the moment. That is not only my job – it is I believe the whole purpose of the Jewish traditions that sanctify these moments – you lift the veil at the *bedekend* and you cannot but help appreciate the magic of this sacred moment. You place the *tallit* on your son or daughter's shoulders and the *shehechianu* catapults you to mountain tops of ecstasy and emotion.

The Psalmist captures this beautifully when he stated: "*Esa ayny el heharim mayayin yavo eszri*" "I will lift my eyes to the mountains for that is from where my salvation shall come!"

The next time *you* find yourselves overwhelmed by the aggravations of daily life, lift *your* eyes to the mountains and seek a higher perspective.

There is a story told of identical twins. One was a hope filled optimist, he always viewed the world from the mountaintops, for him everything was always coming up roses. The other was a sad and hopeless pessimist. He thought that the Murphy in Murphy's Law as a starry-eyed optimist. He was hopelessly mired in the valley muck. The twin's parents were worried over their extremely divergent personalities and brought them to a local psychologist. The psychologist suggested to the parents a plan to balance the extremes of the twin's personalities. "On their next birthday, put them in separate rooms to open their gifts. Give the valley boy, the pessimist, the best toys you can afford, and give the mountain boy, the optimist a box full of cow manure." The parents followed these instructions and carefully observed the results.

When they peeked in on the valley boy, they heard him audibly complaining, "I don't like the color of this computer...I'll bet this calculator will break in a couple of days... I don't like this game...I know someone who's got a bigger toy car than this..." Sadly – he could only see the downside of these wonderful gifts.

Then, tiptoeing across the hall, the parents peeked in and saw their little optimist, their little mountain boy gleefully throwing the cow manure up in the air. He was giggling and shouting: "You can't fool me! No siree: With so much manure, there's got to be a pony around here someplace!"

In today's torah reading – the prophet *Bilaam* moved from the valley to the mountaintops and in so doing his whole life was transformed from one that was filled with curses to one that was filled with blessings. Nothing changed but his perspective. Or rather I should say everything changed because of his perspective.

There is a wonderful Hebrew expression: *mishaneh makom mishaneh mazal*- which loosely translated means – change your place and you might change your luck. Most of us mistakenly believe that if we want to change our fortunes in life we have to change our circumstances. And while there is a certain truth to that I believe that today's torah portion comes to teach us an even more profound understanding of *mishaneh makom mishaneh mazal*. That ultimately our happiness depends not so much on our circumstances as on our perspective. And *mishaneh makom mishaneh mazal* if we can change our place of perspective – if we can look at our world, our own lives – from a higher perspective – we can transform curses into blessings – just as *Bilaam* did so long ago.

Yes, God has given us a wonderful gift – the ability to transform life's curses into blessings. May God also give us the strength to climb to the mountains and appreciate those blessings.