

## Parashat Balak: The Love of the Path of Blessing

Dear Friends,

Parashat Balak is my bar mitzvah parasha, sort of. I was 12 and a half, the youngest in my class, but on the kibbutz the whole class celebrated together and had a joint aliyah to the Torah. It is also my father's parasha, sort of. He was 13 and a half, but his bar mitzvah was postponed due to family circumstances.

I relate these biographical details because they illustrate our freedom of choice. A parasha is not a divine decree. True, we are born on a certain parasha and to my mind this has deep significance, but because we are born each morning anew and even every second anew, in a certain, deep sense, every parasha is "our" parasha.

And Parashat Balak does deal with our freedom of choice. We will be examining two: freedom of will and the freedom to choose between being cursed and being blessed.

The king of Mo'av, Balak ben Tzippor, would like to retain the services of the famous pagan magician Bil'am ben B'or, to come and curse Bnei Yisrael, who are encamped at that time in his land, en-route to the Promised Land. Bil'am's curse would weaken the people and in that way Balak could attack and banish them from his territory.

Bil'am is God-fearing, and when God forbids him to take on this mission, he sends Balak a refusal. But when Balak sends a second delegation, this time with more money, God sees that Bil'am very much wants to take the job. He grants him permission, on condition that he says only what He, God, tells him to say.

This is the first and very powerful lesson of free choice: a person's will has tremendous power! It can mobilize the entire universe. Our Sages said: "A person is led on the path he wishes to go." (Talmud Bavli, Makot, 10:B)

The second lesson of the parasha relating to free choice is the choice between blessing and curse.

Even though Bil'am's task is to curse, he says in advance, and repeats throughout the parasha, that he will say only what God wills him to say. In this case, God wishes him to bless the people. Had God wished him to curse them, he would have.

Or perhaps not...

I would like to suggest that the choice is not between blessing and cursing, but rather between the Divine and the human.

The Divine is, in its essence, blessing. It always seeks life and good. Jealousy, narrow mindedness, ill will - all of these stem from the human ego, from fear and from our mortal drive to survive.

For some of my readers this statement may seem too religious. For others, it may seem naive and frivolous. I wish to claim that this is not a religious statement at all. Rather, it is a descriptive evaluation of life!

The path of blessing is that which respects the vitality that flows and gives life to everything. Those who follow this path are not envious of the success of others. On the contrary; Other people's accomplishments moves them! Those on the path of blessing do not even see death as a curse. For them, even death, difficulty, and illness are part of the secret of vitality which permeates everything. The seed in the ground has to go through a process of decay and death of its outer layer in order to sprout. Its path from the depths of the earth to the light of day involves tremendous difficulty. And even when it finds the light of day, the sun and the wind beat it mercilessly. These are all part of the blessing of vitality that flows throughout Creation.

Contrary to the path of blessing, there is human awareness. Human beings are swamped with terror and existential fear. Survival drives humans out of their mind. From the human perspective, their personal death - and that of their loved ones - is THE ultimate enemy. One has to survive the physical death of the body at any cost! Humans do not have a sense of the vast Oneness that surrounds them and which they are part of. Personal survival in this body is all that matters. If I do not exist, what is the point of existence? Hence, another person's success is a source of fear because it seems to reduce our own self-worth, our standing, and even our existence. In the realm of human awareness, at the end of the day, it's either me *or* him, and it better be me (and my immediate kin).

In this parasha, Balak represents this very human awareness - this basic existential fear. Every one of us has a little Balak within us. We are all afraid; we are all fearful for our existence and that of our loved ones.

And... This is as it should be.

A certain amount of "Balakness" is important, healthy and even good! Survival plays an important role in the development and evolution of all of Creation. When it's in the right proportions, "Balakness" strengthens the path of blessing.

Bil'am's blessings for Am Yisrael (who do not hear them and are not aware of them!) are not done to please or find favor. They are a beautiful and accurate observation of the animating power which exists within Am Yisrael. Am Yisrael is blessed with vitality, with the love of life, and with a special zest for evolving higher and higher. Yet, most of the nations of the world are afraid of Am Yisrael's blessings; from its merits; its talents. Those who have appreciated

these blessings and opened their gates to Am Yisrael have benefitted, until human jealousy and hatred changed their minds.

The freedom we have is not between blessings and curses, but between accepting the Divine path of blessing, which acknowledges and respects the vitality that flows throughout Creation - and the path of human ego, of fear, existential terror, hence, the cursed path.

There is no real curse in Creation. There is only blessing. But there is a sense of being cursed, and it is very common in the human species. It is the source of all of human suffering.

The more a person develops, and his or her awareness broadens beyond a small, narrow personal existence, the more the path of blessing and unity opens before him. When this happens, he will discover, to his amazement, that he himself is eternal and infinite. And then the fear and terror will be replaced by great love.

The love of the path of blessing.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha