

Parashat Balak -- July 7, 2012  
Hazzan Neil Schwartz -- Agudas Israel

Today's Torah Portion is one of the stranger episodes in the Torah, with magic in the form of a talking donkey. It contains the beautiful blessing "*Mah Tov*" - "How goodly are your tents, O Israel" that we chant at the beginning of our Friday evening service.

There is one aspect of *Parashat Balak* that is often overlooked by our commentators as they wrestle with questions of how to evaluate the character of the pagan prophet Bilaam, and the role of angels and magic in our otherwise quite logical Torah text.

In recent weeks we have been chanting the episodes of the false report of the political leaders sent to scout the Promised Land, the Rebellion of Korach, and last week the episode where Moses lost his temper with the complaining Israelites and hit the rock to get water, rather than speaking to the rock and thereby demonstrating God's power.

It appears that after the generation of Israelites who experienced Egyptian servitude was passing on, their children were still not really seeing themselves as a proud, unified nation with the mandate to conquer the Promised Land. Rather they were acting almost like immature children, full of complaints and dissension, doubting both Moses and God.

Then in today's episode the pagan prophet Bilaam is hired by the Moabite king Balak to curse the Israelites, and we hear instead the beautiful blessing "*Mah Tov*" that is now part of our liturgy. Ignoring the issues of whether or not Bilaam was acting out of free will, whether he is a hero or really a villain, and the strange role of the magical talking donkey, the most important point here is the fact that it is a pagan non-Israelite priest who is blessing the Israelite tribes.

This is in stark contrast to the experiences of both Biblical Judaism and the Rabbinic Judaism of the last two millennia, not to mention the horrors we have experienced in Modern Judaism during the last two centuries. From the earliest days of interactions with their Moabite, Edomite, and Philistine neighbors, let alone the major empires of Egypt, Assyria and Babylonia, the ancient Israelites had to fight in order to survive. With the Greeks there was relative peace until the time of the Maccabees, and with Rome there was the larger disaster of total destruction and 2,000 years of Diaspora.

In that Diaspora there were some periods of relative security for Jewish communities, such as in Babylonia and Spain for several centuries each. However, for centuries in Christian Europe there was unrelenting persecution in the form of the Crusades, the Inquisition, and state-sponsored pogroms. Here in North America things have been better, but we know of anti-Semitic incidents in both Canada and the United States.

So, in light of all this unending historic litany of bad relations with our neighbors, which continues in the form of almost universal persecution of the modern State of Israel by their Arab neighbors and some of those same Europeans whose ancestors abetted the Holocaust, what is so special about the “*Mah Tov*” blessing in today’s Torah Portion?

Simply this: here is one Biblical example of a non-Israelite neighbor seeing the **good** aspects of the Israelites that they themselves could not see, nor could their neighbors. While the Israelites were complaining to Moses, and while Amalekites and Edomites were fighting the Israelites, here was the pagan prophet Bilaam blessing them instead.

What does this have to teach us here in Saskatoon, over 3000 years later?

We have our problems, with worries about sustaining our small Jewish community, our own diversity of opinions about religious approaches, and concerns about the safety of Israel and the resurgence of anti-Semitism in many parts of the world and on several campuses right here in Canada.

Yet we are blessed regularly by our non-Jewish neighbors here in Saskatoon. We host 1800 of them for our two major fundraiser dinners, we hosted 2500 of them during our Holocaust programming, we hosted over 3000 of them for FolkFest last summer, and we have good Interfaith relations, including with the local Muslim communities.

This is the subtle lesson of *Parashat Balak*: even when the context is full of problems, ranging from ancient complaints and conflicts to modern diversity and worries, there are good neighbors who do bless us, holding up to us the mirror of acceptance and friendship that reflects our accomplishments as a community. They let us know how much they appreciate the work we do to help make Saskatoon a better community.

Let us accept those blessings gratefully and humbly, as we continue to participate in community life and contribute to that in our unique ways.