

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah - Chukat-Balak

Recently I saw the new “Star Trek” movie. I loved it. I’ve always been a fan, though not a “Trekkie” (those who are know the difference), and I felt the actors in this movie accurately captured the original characters from the television series, all the way down to Scotty’s, “I’m giving it all they’ve got, the engines, she can’t take it.” Even before I went the Rabbi route, I was enamoured with the themes of the original shows. I even wrote a paper for Dr. Ed Goldman’s Midrash class at HUC likening Ezekiel’s vision of the figures of light to the landing party and his vision of the angels’ “wheel within a wheel” as a reference to the bridge of the Starship Enterprise. I have since learned that Gene Roddenberry, Leonard Nimoy and William Shatner (all Jews) had a hand in taking many of the them right out of the Rabbinic tradition. As I went through Rabbinical school, I was amazed to see just how many episodes I found “in text.” After all, the character of Captain Kirk is paradigmatic of our tradition. For him, the rules were guidelines, not barriers. He used his knowledge and training to take the Federation to new lands and new civilizations, to “...boldly go where no man has gone before.” Still, as radical as he was, he never forgot who he served and the tradition and ethical standards that he represented in his role as captain. As I look at the sages we hold in the highest esteem, it is as if they were the archetype for Captain James Tiberias Kirk. They teach us that our way is to always “become,” and never to stagnate spiritually or intellectually. It means that yesterday’s rules have a major vote in tomorrow’s decision making, but not a veto. Truth can never be attained without engagement, and the struggle we go through linking the past to our future is the core of our spiritual existence.

Our texts are filled with collections of conversations between sages, on every level of thought, as to matters of tradition. That we keep majority, minority, and plurality opinions is a testament to our high regard for the value of the debate. In the Mishnah Pirke Avot, our sages spend the entire first chapter plotting out the way in which generations passed the tradition from one to the next. While honoring its place in the chain of the transmission, each successive generation evolved the text and interpretations to both keep it relevant to modernity and to deepen our understanding of its sacred truth.

The tradition of wrestling with textual interpretation and application stems directly from the Torah. A wonderful example can be found in the words that open our morning liturgy which come from this week’s parsha. “Mah tovu ohalekha Yaakov, mishkanotekha Yisrael – How magnificent are your tents Jacob, your dwellings Israel.” The pagan Bilaam was sent to curse Israel, and tried to on three different occasions. Each time the only words he found to utter were words of blessing. For many, this blessing is simply formulaic symmetry, using synonyms for poetic emphasis. Tent and dwelling are two different things, though. The ohel (tent) is the temporary structure that we set up and take down. The mishkan is the structured home, the place of greater permanence.

It is in this dichotomy that we find our way of looking at our tradition and the ways that modernity impacts it in each generation. Rav Avraham Kook wrote, “The old must be made new and the new must be made holy.” The volumes of traditional commentaries get passed from generation to generation. They continue to grow, just as the mishkan in the wilderness continued to take on a greater role in grounding Israel along their journey in becoming a people. Still we move forward. We continually add new ideas and new relevant interpretations to that which has been carried forward. The tent represents

the temporal moments, the forages into the unknown, the fluid arguments and debates that occur as we face living in our own day. Were it not for our rootedness in the mishkan, the more permanent hold of our tradition, we would be without any basis from which to move forward. What I love about our tradition is that this foundation is not static, nor is it monolithic. The chain of transmission demonstrates the breadth of opportunities available for one's approach to text, without unduly burdening the creative thought process with encumbering mandates. We are obligated to remember what came before us so that what we do today does not have to reinvent any wheels. In each generation we build on; we grow from the compendium of everything said before us. For there to be hope that the world might heal, we have to be able to grow each generation past the one previous, and make secure the next generation's ability to surpass our own.

The blessing from Bilaam is itself testimony to our longevity, even against the odds. It is because we are so grounded in preserving the truth of yesterday as the building blocks for a more true tomorrow that we have endured every onslaught determine to end our tradition. Our salvation and continuity is not rooted in our observance of kosher dietary laws or other ritual tradition. Rather, an astronaut can safely reach further into space than by just riding the shuttle. By tethering himself to the shuttle and letting the tether hold him close, he may float in any direction he may choose yet he is still anchored to the shuttle. In this same sense, it is our mishkan, our rootedness that holds us tight as we venture forth in innumerable directions experimenting, testing, and evolving – expanding our understanding of where our core truths can take us. Take a leap of faith, engage yesterday's tradition with tomorrow's eyes. Make sure that the peace of our next Sabbath can become even more certain than one we embark on this week. Shabbat Shalom.