

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah - Balak

As I begin studying with Bar/Bat Mitzvah students, I have several goals in mind. First, I want to help them mature and learn to accept responsibility. Of course, gaining competent use of the Hebrew language is important (since the student will lead worship for the whole congregation), but it is a vehicle rather than a goal. The discipline it takes to learn to use a foreign language is more the aim here. If a young person can grow this type of discipline, he or she can accomplish anything. In addition to this personal growth, I make sure that the student has some real understanding of the liturgy or Torah portion, beyond being able to offer some form of translation. We go through the service and the week's Torah portion in depth, bringing some thoughtful value to the words of the text. As to the liturgy, I am careful to help demonstrate how the service progresses along an intentional path. Every morning, as we arise, there is a process in which we participate that helps us prepare to live a day that makes sense. The prayers are ordered in such a way as to help walk us through that process. As I am fond of teaching, the Rabbis did not simply throw all of the prayers in the air and order them based on which ones hit first. In all, the worship service is supposed to be transformative. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that prayer must be subversive. "Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow callousness, hatred, opportunism, and lies." He added, "Worship is a way of seeing the world in the light of God.... Prayer may not save us, but prayer makes us worth saving." Thus, the service requires intentionality.

The very first prayer in our liturgy presents a conundrum. The rest follow an orderly progression from first assessing the resources on which our bodies can draw to fulfill the daily tasks of healing the world through the thanks we give for the lives that have passed on but are remembered as blessings in our own. The first prayer, though, is out of context. Mah Tovv ohalekha Ya-akov..." How wonderful are the tents of Jacob ..." These are words uttered by the pagan sorcerer Bilaam. The Edomite King had sent him to curse Israel, but upon seeing the people, he could not bring himself to do so. As I looked out over the Mediterranean Sea last Saturday morning (while our group worshipped through the morning service) I found myself obsessing over this piece of the liturgy. I never had a problem with these words being part of the service, but I never stopped to think about why they are the first words. Of all the great pieces of tradition that we could lead with, we choose instead, the words of one who came with the intention to destroy us, but ended up blessing us.

What I figured out, in light of the week's activities and the news around the world, was that there is no more appropriate way to begin worship than to lead with the messianic formula and dream. It is absolutely our religious obligation to make our enemies our friends, and perhaps there is no greater place for us to remind ourselves of this obligation than before we even begin to pray. This being the case, one cannot read the commands to rejoice with bride and groom, heal the sick, free the captive, or even honoring parents in any light other than the requirement that one's prayer needs to lead one on a path to resolving conflict. To emerge from prayer still stuck in older baggage is only to admit that one did not or could not be fully immersed in those moments of introspection and healing. This is the power of meditation; the focus on a single piece of existence while one brings the world around him into some ordered view. This is the power of communal worship; the joining with community in a chorus of affirmation and communal challenge. Different people resonate to different styles of worship, but the

bottom line is that one has to find himself in a different emotional or spiritual place when one emerges from prayer. If that prayer helped us focus on healing relationships that are broken or building bridges where none exist, then we make real Bilaam's blessing and move this world closer to a day of universal peace. While this sounds so easy, we all know that letting go of pain or embracing someone who has "uncomfortable" beliefs is a challenge, We also know, though, that the world can never heal where we spend more time and energy pointing fingers than healing or more time afraid than engaging. There are forces who seek to destroy, but they cannot be stronger than the forces seeking health and strength, for if they were, we would not be here, today. Our job is to find new ways to engage those who set themselves apart so that we might return from the self imposed exiles that separate us from each other. Shabbat Shalom.