D'var Torah: Balak

This week's parsha is the story of Balaam and Balak. Balak is the angry King of the Moabites and has observed the Israelite people as they wander through the desert on their way to the land of Israel. As the Israelites wander they have a tendency to over power the people and societies that cross their path. Balak sees them coming over the horizon and fears for his livelihood and his people. He calls a meeting of the elders of his community and they decide to send for a well known scholar and oracle Balaam who in a neighboring land. Balaam is not an Israelite, yet for a very curious reason that the Torah never fully explains, Balaam is able to talk and communicate with God, much in the same way Abraham and Moses talk with God.

The Moabites beseech Balaam to curse the Israelites, for it is said of Balaam, "Whoever he blesses is blessed and whoever he curses is cursed. Balaam receives a number of delegations from the Moabite King, each increasingly pleading that he come and

curse the approaching Israelites. Balaam consults God and is told in no uncertain terms that he is not to go to Moab, and he is not to curse the Israelites, for they are a people blessed by God. But Balaam, who is now receiving visitors from Moab almost daily pleads with God for some understanding, if for nothing else just to stop these people from knocking on his door at all hours of the day and night. God relents and reluctantly permits Balaam to travel to Moab, under the condition that Balaam may only say what God instructs him to say.

The next morning Balaam saddles his horse and heads off for Moab. But God is not thrilled with Balaam's decision to go, and decides to make his journey difficult. God places an angel in the road before Balaam's horse. The angel is only visible to the horse, which upon seeing the angel with a drawn sword rears up and tosses Balaam to the ground on three consecutive occasions. Balaam hurt and embarrassed beats the horse within an inch of it life. At this the horse turns to Balaam and says, "What

have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?" Balaam, seemingly impressed that his horse just talked to him, replies, "You have made a fool of me, if I had a sword I would kill you." To this the horse responds, "Look I am the horse that you have been riding your entire life! Have I been in the habit of throwing you to the ground without a good reason?" Balaam answers, "No you haven't." At this Balaam's eyes are opened and his notices the angel standing in the road and promptly bows in reverence.

The angel explains that his presence there is to remind Balaam that God is watching him every step of the way on this journey and that he is only permitted to say to the Israelites what God instructs him to say. Balaam readily agrees and goes on to arrive in Moab. The King quickly asks Balaam to curse the Israelites as they are even closer than before. But when Balaam opens his mouth to render a curse, a blessing comes out instead. The King is incised and asks again for a curse on Israel, yet for a second and third time it is blessing that comes from Balaam's lips.

On his fourth attempt Balaam opens his mouth to curse and instead speaks the blessing, *"Ma tovu ohalecha yakov, mishcan kvod-decha Yisrael"*/ "How beautiful are the tents of Jacob, how glorious the dwelling places of Israel." At this the King consents to defeat, Israel is permitted to continue without further harrassment on its journey and Balaam returns to his home. But the lessons of this weird and compelling story is left for us to figure out and make sense of.

What does this text mean to us today, what lesson in this man's story can we apply to our daily lives? The story is here to remind us of the power of words, the impact our sentiments can have on one another. Sticks and stones aside, this Torah portion teaches that names are truly powerful, they can hurt, and they can also heal and bless. We live in a time when paragraphs and sentences, words and letters flow without controls, without limits. The power of the internet, the immediacy of cell phones and e-mail permit our every utterance to be transmitted

instantaneously to our intended recipient. Do we really take the time to think about what we say? Do we consider the power of our words, their ability to heal as well as to hurt? Or in our rush to get the message out, to fire off that memo, to communicate the details forgetting about the sentiments, the flavor they are wrapped in; in this rush do we remember the power of our words? It would be nice to have it as Balaam does, he could not utter a hurtful word only blessing. God prevented him for speaking in a way that would harm, anger or hurt. But the freedom of speech that we enjoy, demand, and defend with vigor puts no constraints on our speech other than those that we ourselves impose. God's hand does not sweep down from heaven and cover our mouths when we use speech that hurts. Their is no divine bar of soap to wash out our mouths when we utter not only bad words, but words of hatred and venom. In this respect we are like both Balaam and God. We are like Balaam in that when we use words of love, friendship, consideration and blessing people are

truly blessed, and their recognition of our consideration, our thought is readily apparent in the words they use back to us. Just as certainly when we curse, using words that lack consideration, that are abrupt and insensitive they are cursed by us, their hurt showing by the escalation of angry words and feelings. And we are like God in that only we can determine which sentiment will leave our lips.

In my view perhaps the most powerful and important prayer in our siddur is the prayer that comes directly after the silent meditation. We read, "O God, keep my tongue from evil and my lips from deceit. Help me to be silent in the face of derision, humble in the presence of all... May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O God my Rock and my redeemer." Our ability to speak, to communicate with each other is a precious and powerful gift, we have in our lives been hurt and uplifted by the simplest words the smallest of phrases. May we never forget the power of our speech, using our words to bring blessing into the

lives of those dear to us, those we work with, indeed into the lives everyone we encounter. Then will we truly be deserving of the freedom and liberty of speech we so enjoy.

Oh and as for the horse who spoke, what can be said about that. Our tradition teaches that animals have always had the power of speech, only God keeps their voices silent so as not embarrass us with their superior intellect.