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 sorcerer Balaam to curse the Israelites, for it is said of Balaam, “Whoever he blesses is blessed and whoever he curses is cursed. Three times Balaam tries to cures the Israeliteis but what comes out of his mouth is more of a blessing than a curse; not what he intended.

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 harassment on its journey and Balaam returns to his home. But the lessonsof 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, letters and images flow without controls, without limits. The power of the internet, the immediacy of texting, Instagram, tiktok 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, do we remember the power of our words, how they can also hurt and destroy, how they can curse?

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 puts no safety belts on our speech other than those that we ourselves put there.

God’s hand does not sweep down from heaven and cover our mouths when we use speech that hurts. There is no divine bar of soap to wash out our mouths when we utter not only bad words, but hurtful and hate filled words. 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.