THE BLESSING WAS A CURSE II
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz – JULY 16, 2022

1. This week is Parashat Balak
2. Contains the story of Baalam a sorcerer hired by the King of Moad (Balak) to curse the Jewish people. He agrees on the condition that he will only say the words that G-d puts in his mouth.
3. Each time he tries to curse he instead is forced to offer a blessing.
4. Third time he says the famous verse Mah Tovu:
    a. מה טבו אהליך יעקב משכנתיך ישראל - *how beautiful are your tents of Jacob, your dwelling places, oh Israel.*
5. The rabbis and commentators on the torah wonder:
    a. *Why are the words **tents** and **dwellings** Ohalecha and Mishkanotech in the plural?*
    b. Where is the great beauty in everyone making their own private space – wouldn't it be a greater blessing if it was one big tent, if we all dwelled together?
6. Rashi says: that the beauty here is that Bilaam has observed Israel's camp from three directions, and he sees that their windows do not face each other. Israel's private spaces are indeed private. People do not peer into their neighbor's tent.
    a. But too much privacy leads to a lack of social responsibility. The positive peer pressure which comes with having to live alongside your neighbors as a good neighbor.
7. Our neighbor to the west of our property recently sold their home. The new own unsurprisingly is going to tear it down and built a quad plex, plus a lane-way, such is East Vancouver.

a. A few weeks ago he approached me and explained that he would like my permission to replace the fence with something higher so as to provide privacy for the occupants who will now be overlooking our back yard.
    i. Overlooking is key here, because of the positioning of the windows in the new building, they will be able to see over the fence (of any height) but he wanted to replace the lattice top of our existing fence with something solid so we could not see their grounds.
    ii. I thought back to a few years ago when we moved into our new home it had a fence that was truly falling down. For the first few months we had neither the time, good weather or resources to replace it. But it was an eye sore – so I tore it down.
b. For 3 months we had no fence – you know what happened?
    i. Our neighbors came into our yard.
        1. To chat
        2. To borrow a ladder
        3. To jump on our trampoline
    ii. Then eventually with the help of my neighbor we built the fence that this new neighbor wanted to tear down and build taller.
        1. It's a beautiful ceder fence
        2. The Robert Frost poem ran through my head the whole time "Good fences make good neighbors"
            a. He was wrong – they only make good fences.

8. As I considered my neighbors proposal I wondered if we should build a fence at all? Maybe it was better when, like in

some homes I visited in suburban New Jersey many years ago there are no fences and yards just run into each other?

a. We have a dog now, if you were here or watching last night you know of her import to our family, and you know her full Jewish Name. And so a fence is necessary

b. But there is a larger existential question, do we need all the fences that we build up between ourselves and others?

i. Borders between, cities, nations, people

ii. Political parties

iii. Nearly half a dozen synagogues just up and down Oak Street

1. In the Jewish community alone the list could go on

a. Why can't pray together as Jews?

b. Why do we find it necessary to bifurcate and subdivide again and again and again in order to block out that which we don't like – rather than learn to live with our differences. To live together.

c. We need doors and windows, not walls and fences

i. Between Israelis & Palestinians

ii. Between Jews

iii. Between people of different faiths, backgrounds, politics

iv. Between each other

9. I see it everywhere and so do you

a. We curate our news and our music

b. It used to be that families watched TV together, each tolerating the others shows. Now we are each on our own

screens in our own rooms and with PVRs we are watching on our own time.

c. In Judaism we have so many flavors of synagogues, so many nuanced organizations for this or that cause.
    i. Look at what is happening with Federations across the continent. Campaigns are dwindling (ours is bucking that trend), but philanthropy is growing. We are still giving but we are micro targeting our tzedakkah. I'll give to this, but not to that.
    ii. Maybe it is better for tzedakkah – but I don't think it is so good for the Jewish people.

10. These last 2 weeks in our congregation I have officiated at 5 funerals, 2 weddings, half a dozen shiva minyanim and a baby naming.
    a. At each of those events I met people who had heard about me or our congregation but had never experienced Judaism as we practice it.
        i. Many said it was eye opening, some found it better, some found it wanting, but all were enriched by the exposure to something unfamiliar.
        ii. To quote a verse that has become a proud moniker for me as a relatively new Canadian in the face of so much division in our world, "Our diversity is our strength".
            1. I celebrate the diversity of the Jewish people and truly of humanity, within the bounds of respect for personal autonomy, freedom of speech and expression.
            2. How beautiful are your tents of Jacob, that everyone can do as they please in their own dwelling, that none should seek to impose

their practices or customs upon each other, and that we can still with all of our separate tents and dwellings camp and settle the land together as one people.