

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 6/30/18

Balak 2018

As the Torah's narrative continues we find the Israelites on a roll. Even though they initially make it clear that they want no confrontation, (going so far as to say that they'll pay for any food they eat while crossing their territory) nonetheless they have clash with the desert kingdoms along the way to the Promised Land. Each time their offers of peace are rebuffed and each time Gd then helps them to be successful militarily. In this week's parsha, our People come to Moav, ruled by a man named Balak. Balak was a weaker king than his neighbors in the region. The defeat of the other kings instilled fear in Balak's heart, and he realized that waging a "conventional" war against the Israelites would be futile. His plan was to enlist Bilam to curse the People of Israel.

In Bilam's third and final attempt to place a curse upon Benei Yisrael, he looks down from a mountain overlook and, as the portion says, "Bilam saw that the Lord wanted to bless Israel, so he did not try to change that by using any kind of magic. But Bilam turned and looked toward the desert. He looked out across the desert and saw all the Israelites. They were camped with the tribes in their different areas. Then the Spirit of Gd came on him, and he gave this message: These are the words I heard from Gd. I saw what Gd All-Powerful showed me. I humbly tell what I clearly see. "People of Jacob, your tents are beautiful! Israelites, your homes are beautiful! You are like rows of palm trees planted by the streams. You are like gardens growing by the rivers. You are like sweet-smelling bushes planted by the Lord..."

What, you might wonder, made the Jewish tents look so "beautiful?" Rabbi Yochanan in the Talmud asks that very question and answers by saying, "He saw that the openings of their tents were not aligned one opposite the other, and he said, "These are people worthy to have the Divine Presence, the Shechina, rest upon them." Interestingly, from this section comes the Talmud's comment halakhic/legal concept known as hezek re'iya - which means literally "visual trespass," as important today as it was 2000 years ago. The Talmud teaches that the possibility of seeing into a neighbor's home constitutes a form of legal "damage." Halakha thus requires that when building a house adjacent to another, one must ensure not to position the windows and doors in a manner that allows the neighbors to look into each other's homes. The Talmud spends pages discussing the placement of doors and windows in order to assure privacy. Bilam took note of Benei Yisrael's compliance with this rule assuring one another's right to privacy, and saw that as worthy of blessing.

To this day, hezek re'iya is, as I mentioned, an important concept in Jewish law, and one that has many implications for modern society. Today I'll share but two:

The first is that this law is an important reminder that people are entitled to keep their personal lives private. Years ago, when asked during an interview for CNBC's "Inside the Mind of Google" special, about whether users should be sharing private information on Google, Eric Schmidt, Google's founder responded, "If you have something that you don't want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn't be doing it in the first place." Journalists were quick to point out the personal hypocrisy of Schmidt's dismissive stance, noting that for about a year he blacklisted a group of reporters from using Google after they published an article with information about his salary, neighborhood, hobbies, and political donations -- all obtained from Google searches. And

of course, Facebook is now spending millions of dollars trying to reinstall confidence in its users that private information is not being sold or given out to others. In other words, Facebook and Google are finally understanding what the Talmud knew, and urged us to practice, 2000 years ago!

But there is another broader concept underlying this halakha of hezek re'iya. Namely, it discourages us from looking at our friends and neighbors as the definitive models that we must follow in life. All too often, people reach decisions regarding their personal priorities; how to spend their time and money, child-raising policies, their political opinions, as well as their opinions of individuals both public and private, based on what they perceive among their peers. We tend to judge others based on the private information they themselves make public. So much of what used to be kept private is now aired in social media, and that makes it so much harder to avoid. Now you actually have to look away since this private information is pushed onto your phone or computer on a daily basis. Many people spend too much time "looking into each other's tents", observing and taking note of what their friends and neighbors do and say. This tendency is terribly destructive on a number of different levels. For one thing, it causes people to live under the constant pressure of maintaining or exceeding the standards set by their peers, rendering it virtually impossible to achieve any sort of contentment in life.

But even worse, perhaps, this tendency can push apart friends, family members and neighbors. Social relationships are reduced - or transformed as a result of personal lives and opinions made public, threatening social and communal stability in ways we have never encountered before. I don't spend much time using social media, and perhaps I should do so more. But I also know people who feel they know too much about other people, even when those folks are, themselves, putting their private lives in public view.

So perhaps we should think again about Bilam's blessing and "reposition the doors of our tents," as it were. Just because the tent door is open does not mean we need to look in. It's tempting for sure, but when peering at the "private made public" tears at the fabric of relationships, maybe we need to train ourselves to look away. Maybe we need to resist the temptation to comment, to judge, and rebuke. Maybe we need to respect a person's privacy even more than they do themselves. In all healthy and meaningful relationships there are aspects of another's personality, their traits, their idiosyncrasies and their quirks that we acknowledge and understand, but do not dwell on. We overlook what might be otherwise easy to see for the sake of a healthier relationship. Just because something can be seen does not mean we need to look. As Bilam reminds us, if we want to keep our "tents together" and our community strong, we need to be discerning in what we focus on as well as when we turn our gaze aside. In the information age we live in, a discerning eye can focus on that which brings us together and look past those things that might pull us apart.