

D'var Torah

Parshat Balak

Kol Sasson

July 12, 2008

Shabbat Shalom.

First of all, I'm not going to talk about the holiness of time or space today...well, mostly. I'm going to talk a bit about community.

Today's parsha is Balak. It is, of course, a very meaty Parsha with one of the great Bible Stories at its heart, a beautiful poem, and a pretty good story at the end too!

Balak, King of Moab, decides that he probably cannot win a war against the Jews, so he decides to send the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites and get rid of them that way. It's slimy and underhanded. Balaam at first refuses but when asked a second time, Gd comes to him at night and tells him to go and do it as long as he says exactly what Gd wants."

Balaam gets up very early, too early it turns out, saddles his donkey and goes. Then we have the scene of the angel in their path and the talking donkey. Finally, Balaam builds his 7 alters, tries to curse Israel, but instead winds up blessing them four times.

The third blessing is the most famous one and the one that I want to discuss briefly. It is, of course, Mah Tov. The Talmud teaches that Ohalecha (tents) refers to the study halls and that Mishkinotecha (dwelling places) refers to the Temple and synagogues. Where the shechina dwells.

But I'm not as learned as the Rabbis in the Talmud. Looking at the pshat, the text is "tents" and "dwelling places". And what do you have when you bring a lot of tents and homes together? It's a neighborhood...stretching out like brooks, like gardens, with water flowing forth. Those are words that scream relationships to me. So, what is Balaam blessing? He is blessing the Jewish community of Israel.

So, it seems to me that Mah Tov is blessing Israel in three ways: As a Beit Midrash, a House of Study, a Beit Tefillah, a House of Prayer and, if you permit me the hubris to include my pshat with the rabbi's drash, a Beit Knesset, House of Assembly.

Anyone who works in or around synagogues knows what season we are in the middle of now: Membership Season when talk of recruitment, integration and retention abounds. A good portion of my days at work this week were spent fielding calls from Prospective Members and from brand new members wanting to know how they can become a part, or a bigger part of a synagogue community.

The dark side of this season is that along with the new comes the departure of current members. Some of this is natural churn. People moving, shifting priorities, I talk with those with financial problems (they don't get to resign), people who are mad at the Gd, mad at the Rabbi, mad at the President, and mad at me.

One call last week really concerned me. It wasn't an unusual call. I've gotten it many times before. It was a grandmother switching synagogues to be at the new shul that her daughter and grandkids were attending. In fact, the synagogue they were joining was mine!

So, why did it concern me? Because as a part of the call, I asked why they were leaving their current Temple. Her answer was they had been members for 40 years and since the Rabbi is retiring, it's time for them to leave.

Now, I fully understand the importance of a Rabbi for a synagogue. And there is certainly nothing unusual about membership attrition when a tenured Rabbi leaves nor about switching synagogues to be with your family. But it got me thinking, where is her Beit Knesset, which, for me means more synagogue community rather than "House of Assembly."

I've spent a lot of time working on mission statements for synagogues but it always comes down to those three aspects stated and restated in one form or another: "Beit K'nesset, Beth Midrash, Beit Tefillah."

Synagogues are the central, core institution in a Jewish community with only three things to worry about but obviously she had missed out on Beit K'nesset part of her synagogue membership experience. Clearly, her synagogue had failed on that key point.

It's not enough to provide a place to study and pray. Synagogues must provide relationships as well because a relationship with Gd is not always enough. We need relationships with others as well.

So, what lessons do we take from this for Kol Sasson as a fledgling shul? As we look towards our long range planning in the fall, if you'll excuse me Jane and Rochelle, we need to ensure our footing along these three related paths. We need to learn from the aborted curse of Balaam and put things in place so that we are sure that none of us will be leaving 39 years from now just because our beloved Rabbi retires. Making sure that we offer our members not only meaningful prayer and study, but also actively work to maintain and sustain the wonderful community that we have created.

Shabbat Shalom.