

## **Torah portion Balak from Numbers 22:2 -25:9**

The name of the Torah portion for this Shabbat is Balak from Numbers 22:2-25:9. It is named after the King of Moab, Balak. Balak is afraid that the Israelites have become too numerous and worried that they will attack his nation. He sends for Balaam ben Beor, a pagan prophet, to go and curse the people of Israel. Balaam explains to King Balak that he can only do or say what God commands him to do. At first, God tells him not to go, but when Balak insists, God tells him to go, but to only say what God commands him. Three times Balaam goes to curse the Israelites, but God puts words of blessing in his mouth instead. On one of his journeys to the Israelites, God placed an angel with a spear in his hands before Balaam's donkey, and of course, the donkey stops. Not seeing the Angel himself, Balaam beats the donkey three times to make her go forward, but the donkey stops in order to save her master from being speared. Finally, the donkey speaks to Balaam and asks him why he is beating her, and finally Balaam looks up and sees the angel, who reprimands him for mistreating her. Balaam asks if he should turn back, but the angel tells him to continue, but reminds him that he must only say what God commands. When Balaam sees the Israelites, he declares: "How good are your tents oh Jacob, your dwelling places, oh Israel." (Mah Tov), which is the song we sang as an opening song tonight, and one that is often part of the Saturday morning Shabbat service.

The Torah often uses comedy and storytelling in order to convey powerful messages filled with the wisdom that our tradition imparts to us. We often see a wide range of colorful characters that infuse the stories with wit and humor. Although, at first, the story of the donkey may seem absurd to us, there are many lessons that can be learned from it. This is one of only two portions that uses talking animals in it, the first one being the snake in the Garden of Eden, which I discussed last week. Being a huge animal lover myself, this story touches my heart and I can relate to it. Even after being beaten by Balaam, the donkey refuses to go forward when the angel is there because the spear would have killed Balaam and he had love and loyalty towards his owner, even through the mistreatment he was receiving. Animals often sense things that we do not, because we are not always keenly aware of things that surround us. They may not be able to speak, but they often communicate with us in many other ways. The sage, Rashi, in his commentary on this portion, believed that animals could see spiritual beings that are blocked from the human eye, because human intelligence would cause people to live in constant fear if they could perceive everything around them. I often see this in the form of denial and not wanting to see the truth or the reality of things in our lives.

The sage Rambam disagreed with Rashi. He asserted that angels were not physical beings and could not be seen by people or animals, unless they assumed a

human form, as in the 3 strangers who visited Abraham. Rambam's commentary said that the she-donkey didn't actually see the angel, but only sensed that it was in danger when the angel stood there with a sword. He stated that animals possess a kind of understanding or awareness about the world around them, that protects them from danger. However, Rambam says that they lack "knowing", that is, a higher order cognitive ability that allows them to speculate about causation (why things happen). According to Rambam, the donkey didn't know what was stopping her, only that it was something frightening. He believed that only humans possess those traits and that is what makes us unique.

Having owned many animals; cats, dogs and horses, I have experienced how animals can often sense when someone is upset or sick or there is something that is going to happen that they won't like. I also have experienced how my animals forgive me when I'm crabby or snap at them when I'm stressed out and they did something I didn't like. They were still loyal to me and loved me unconditionally. I also think they can understand us when we try to talk to them or communicate something important. I'll never forget when my horse, Phantom, had colicked which can be very serious and life threatening to a horse. I was very worried that he wouldn't make it. I remember crying and hugging him and telling him he couldn't leave me now. We had more learning work to do together. I sensed that he completely understood me and he was making a conscious effort to get better, which he

did and is still with me today. Actually, it is a known fact that horses, as well as other animals, can help people in distress. There is horse therapy for those who have gone through trauma, because horses are so perceptive and can really connect with someone who is in need.

I know my animals often sensed when I was sad or upset or when I was going out of town. Animals have that awareness that we often lack. So sometimes it takes an animal to show us what it really means to be human.

We learn from this portion, that we also often experience obstacles in our lives-metaphorically beating them and cursing and not imagining that we might need to open our eyes and understand these setbacks as, perhaps, divine messages. The characters in this portion are struggling against the will of God or God's messages, so to speak. Balak keeps forcing Balaam to curse the Israelites and Balaam keeps trying because of his greed for the wealth he will acquire if he succeeds.

We, too, often uselessly struggle with obstacles. We think we know the right direction, but God may be throwing these obstacles at us, in order to guide us on our paths. I have definitely seen this in my own life. If I had only listened to those messages, my life would/could have been easier or more direct.

This portion also shows that the Torah acknowledged that there were prophets outside of Judaism. Our ancestors recognized that every religious community has its mystics. The Israelites also realized that their community needed to hear the message and follow through on it. The beautiful words of the Mah Tov that we sang and I will chant from Torah in a few moments, are a message of hope. Not only

can we see the prophets or sages of other religious groups, but other faiths can also see us as people of faith and peace. In a world that has grown in anti-Semitic behavior, it is important to show the world that we are a people of great faith and who desire peace and harmony in the world. It is why I have worked so diligently in the area of interfaith communication. In working and caring about people of other faiths, we build trust and caring between us. In this way we cause others to say of us: “Mah Tov u'ohalecha Yaakov” How goodly are your dwelling places and the people within your synagogues and places of worship. We feel safe with you and we enjoy being with you. It is hard to be mean or say bad things against people who have become your friends and whom you trust.

As I have looked upon this congregation over the past 6 years, I have often felt God’s blessing on CEEW. How good, kind and loyal are these congregants and their work to maintain the financial and spiritual health of this congregation. I have seen CEEW struggle with problems or obstacles, but we have always persevered and put the importance of community and the health of our congregation foremost in our thoughts and actions, even if we might disagree about how to go about those actions. Yes, there are arguments or some congregants have little issues with each other. But I feel as if our congregation always keeps the higher goal in mind and they always “hear God’s ethical laws and do them.” I know that this will continue even after I retire and you have another wonderful spiritual leader guiding you into the future.

May we always look at our community with the same eyes as Balaam when he saw the Israelites and blessed them. May God continue to bless this congregation and all of it's congregants. Kein Yehi Ratzon-may this be God's will. I will be chanting Numbers 24:1-5